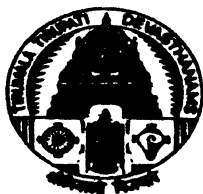


VEDANTA DESIKA'S GODA STUTI

Prema Nandakumar



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FOREWORD

Goda Devi or Andal is one of the most celebrated among the Vaishnava saints of South India. Everything in the life of Goda Devi is mystic, is supra-natural- her advent in the world, her marriage and her final union with the Lord. Her immortal works- *Thiruppavai* and *Nachiar Tirumozhi*-describing the soul's eternal quest for the ultimate goal are gems of poetic excellence and ecstatic devotion. According to the Acharyas, they contain the essence of the Vedas. The Bridal mysticism that gleams through Goda Devi's luminous hymns splendidly express the Bhagavata concept that the Supreme Lord is the only Man; all others form Brahma downwards are like women (who long to be united with Him).

'*Goda Stuti*' written by Vedanta Desika, in praise of Goda brings out the greatness and glory of Goda and her words. Set in sweet and simple language it is full of literary beauty and spiritual fervour. This stotra of 29 verses abounds in excellences and the author himself has described it as 'bahuguna ramaniyam'. In this work, Desika, that Supreme Master of logic and poesy, has conveyed to us not only the divine aura radiated by Goda Devi through her compassion and love but also the highest philosophy and religious ideals revealed in her works.

Dr. Prema Nandakumar has rendered a great service to the non-Sanskrit knowing readers by translating this much-acclaimed work into English. She captures the majesty and sublimity of *Goda Stuti* in her natural, graceful style. Dr. Prema Nanda Kumar's critical acumen combined with her complete mastery over the subject makes the commentary, a rare treat to the readers.

We hope the devotees will find in this book the treasures of Desika's philosophy and devotional thoughts which will help them lead a spiritual life.

EXECUTIVE OFFICER,
Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams,
Tirupati.

PREFACE

The presence of Goda Devi in Indian literature is wide and deep. Considered as an incarnation of Mother Earth, people from all walks of life have prayed to her for her grace to achieve the very best in their lives and to gain the presence of the Lord. There have been scholarly books, commentaries, dramas and prayerful poems. She is fondly envisioned in folk lore too, as seen in Tamil *Kummi* and Telugu *Tirunamamu* poems. Emperor Krishnadeva Raya's epic *Amukta Malyada* based on her life, has given rise to the great commentaries of Vavilla Ramaswami Sastry and Vedam Venkatraya Sastry. Among sublime poems, Vedanta Desika's *Sri Goda Stuthi*, Marriganti Appala Desika's *Sri Goda Sthavam* and Kesava Kaviraja's *Sri Goda Parinaya Champu* in Sanskrit and Madhurakavi Srinivasa Iyengar's *Kothai Venpa* in Tamil, are well known. Recent additions to narratives on Goda Devi's devotional life are the Telugu poems, *Goda Vaibhavam* (1979) by Ekkirala Krishnamacharya and *Amuktha* (1998) by Kovala Sampathkumaracharya. The fountainhead of all these works is certainly, Vedanta Desika's (13th century) *Sri Goda Stuthi*.

The time has come now to introduce the younger generations to this priceless heritage based on Goda Devi's luminous life of devotion to Krishna in the English language. During 1983-84, I happened to write daily on the *Sri Goda Stuthi* of Vedanta Desika for the Vijayawada edition of *The Indian Express*. I am grateful to Sri R. Sampath (who was in-charge of the edition) for his suggestion and his enthusiastic acceptance of my work. The articles received widespread attention and as the poem of Vedanta Desika had not been translated into English nor any commentary available in the English language, there were requests for issuing the articles as a book. I am deeply grateful to Dr. P. Krishnaiah, I.A.S., Executive Officer of T.T. Devasthanams for kindly acceding to my request and publishing this book.

In writing the commentary I have benefitted much by the Tamil edition of Vedanta Desika's Sthotras by the erudite scholar, Sri V.N. Sriramadesikacharya of Oppiliappan Koil. In the eighties, when I was writing the work, I received constant help and encouragement from my father, Prof. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar. Though he has withdrawn from the physical body, his love continues to guide me in my literary and spiritual endeavours.

I am thankful to Dr. N.S. Ramamurthy and Sri V. Sreesan of T.T. Devasthanams for their never-failing help and attention to detail in seeing the book through the press. As always, my mother, Srimati Padmasani and my husband, Sri M.S. Nandakumar have helped me in drawing very close to Srivaishnavism. My salutations to them for sustaining me in every way.

Prema Nandakumar



Sri Goda Devi (*Andal*)

VEDANTA DESIKA'S SRI GODA STUTI

The Margasirsa month is dedicated to Goda Devi and her immortal hymn, *Tiruppavai*. Goda Devi's blameless life of devotion and the human-divine concentration posited in *Tiruppavai* have been the subject of veneration by devotees and poets through the last one thousand years. There have been innumerable exegetic tomes, dramas, folk ballads and poems on Goda Devi that have the stamp of a rare devotion on them. Of these, two works stand out. *Amukta Malyada*, an epic in Telugu by Krishna Deva Raya and *Sri Goda Stuti*, a hymnal verse garland in Sanskrit by Vedanta Desika.

Vedanta Desika (1268-1369) was a great Vaishnava Acharya who presided over the Acharya Peethams at Kanchipuram and Srirangam at different times. A brilliant scholar and sublime poet, he was, during his life time, acclaimed with such honorifics as Kavitarika Kesari, Kavikathaka Simha, Kavikathaka Ghata Kesari and Sarvatantra Swatantra. Numerous are his writings exegetical, philosophical, didactic and ethical. His poetic output is also immense and includes nearly thirty hymns, a sandesa kavya (*Hamsa Sandesam*), a Mahakavya (*Yadavabhyudayam*) and a drama (*Sankalpa Suryodayam*). A rasika, Bhakta and scholar, Vedanta Desika can only be described as a phenomenon.

He was a great traveller. Tirupati was a major love and his devotional lyric garland, *Daya Sataka* was inspired by the Venkata Hill. There are also breath-taking descriptions of the surroundings of Tirupati in *Hamsa Sandesa* and *Yadhavabhyudayam*. Vedanta Desika was also gifted with a faculty of critical appreciation. Thus, though an intense devotee of the holy places associated with Vishnu, he does not mince words when giving an account of pseudo-devotees and imitation saints he had encountered

in Dwaraka and Ayodhya. In the South he visited various famous places like Melkote (Tirunarayanapuram), Thiruvananthapuram and of course, Srivilliputtur. It was his visit to this birth place of Andal that was to gift to posterity the poetic gem, *Goda Stuti*. This was a natural effort for him, an effortless exclamation of fulfilment, for he was deeply devoted to Goda Devi and spent his long life in propagating the Ramanuja Darsana. And Ramanuja too was a great devotee of Goda Devi and *Tiruppavai* which earned for him the sobriquets, 'Koyil Annan' (Elder Brother) and *Tiruppavai Jeer*.

Goda Stuti is both high philosophy and sublime poetry. It is indeed a visible gesture of total self-surrender (prapatti). It is also highly dramatic for not only do we find the aspirant-love of Goda Devi for God here, but also the manner in which the answering Grace of Ranganatha envelops his devotee. For, even a little wandering in the groves of Vaishnavism will bring us close to the footprints of the Hound of Heaven. The Lord goes in search of his devotee as Rama for Sita, as Ranganatha for Goda Devi. He is ever anxious to regain the beautiful soul (sarvanga sundari) that has been lost in the folds of earth, for a little while. Sita pinning away in the Asoka grove for Rama is not much different from Goda Devi anxiously waiting at Srivilliputtur for a vision of Krishna.

*"Light, colour, thought, sleep—
These have left me – O ye clouds!
I shall sing Govind's praises
And ask my soul to wait.
I rest with the golden garlands
In the garden of Narayana,
Waiting: when will I hear
The sound of the Lord's Corich
And the twang of Sarnga bow?"*

(Nachiya Tirumoli 8-3, 9-9)

Both are emanations of Bhu Devi, daughters of Mother Earth, and symbolise the human life on earth yearning for the life divine.

Tradition ascribes the genesis of *Goda Stuti* to Vaikasi Vasanthotsava (the Spring Festival in May-June) when Goda Devi's utsava vigraha is taken in procession to the temple of Venkateswara in Natakasalai Street. Vedanta Desika had come to attend the festival, and as he was approaching the temple of Goda Devi, he came face to face with the deity. A sudden gust of ananda consciousness enveloped him and he began inditing verses in praise of Goda Devi. By the time all of them reached the Vasanta Mantapa of Venkateswara's temple the lyric garland was complete. The 29 verses of *Goda Stuti* are a testimony to the richness of Vedanta Desika's poetic imagination, his control over the Sanskrit prosody, and his unbounded dēvōtional fervour. To this day, the *Goda Stuti* is recited at the Spring Festival of Vaikasi in Srivilliputtur by the descendants of Perialvar (Vishnuchitta), the foster-father of Goda Devi. An experience of divine bliss is invariably communicated to the listeners at that time.

Goda Stuti has done yeoman service in propagating the life and message of Goda Devi beyond the borders of Tamil Nadu and Vaishnava religion as it is in chaste Sanskrit. The very first verse sets the tone of the poem by assuring us that Goda Devi is Patience and Compassion incarnate, two qualities absolutely necessary for the Mother to deal with us, her errant children, who learn very little even after repeated exhortations. Struggling as we do in the dangerous seas of life, we need the Mother's compassion to save us and lead us on the path of Dharma to our Goal.

Again, in the course of the poem, Vedanta Desika refers to the power of Goda Devi's life as an inspiration for devotees and poets. She was a devotee and poet and in her pasurams deep devotion and exquisite poetry are as well commingled as the dancer and the dance. Contemplating on her life and reciting the Tiruppavai are the best ways of assuring ourselves a future as a devotional poet. Hasn't Goda Devi herself mentioned this in the final verse of *Tiruppavai*.

*"Goda, daughter of Vishnuchitta
Has retold how the moon-faced damsels
Got their desires fulfilled by praying*

*To Madhava, the same Kesava
Who churned the ocean with ships afloat,
Devotees who repeat in order the thirty verses
Will be rewarded with happiness and grace
By the red-eyed, four-armed, noble Vishnu."*

Sri Goda Stuti - 1

*"I take refuge in Godadevi,
The wish-yielding creeper
In the grove of Vishnuchitta's family;
That clings to the sandalwood tree
Of Rangaraja;
She is lovely and incarnates
The patience of Mother Earth
And the Compassion of Mahalakshmi.
I seek no other refuge."*

It is apt that the very first verse should offer a cluster of nature imagery as Goda Devi is constantly associated with flowers and flower garlands. Goda signifies "sweet like a flower garland"; her other name is Soodi-k-kodutha Nachiyar (Amukta Malyada) which means 'the maid who offered the garland after putting it on'. Vishnuchitta's family is referred to as a grove (nandana); indeed, he is in the forefront of devotees who spend their lives in pushpakainkarya of the Lord. It was in Vishnuchitta's garden that Goda devi was found as a babe in a tulasi bush. This garden lies between the temples of Godadevi and Vatapatrasayi in Srivilliputtur.

Goda Devi is compared to the wish-yielding creeper in Indra's grove. While poetic convention sees a young girl as a lovely creeper, this particular creeper is referred to as 'kalpavalli'. In his advice to the king, Bhartrihari says: "The earth yields all varieties of desired fruits like kalpaka creeper" (Niti satakam, 38). Goda Devi's grace also sees to it that all our desires are fulfilled. And if a rare creeper like the kalpaka raises the very atmosphere of a garden, the birth of Goda Devi has also brought high elevation to Vishnuchitta's family.

Being the worthy daughter of Vishnuchitta makes Godadevi an object for our reverence. Besides, her being a poet-devotee places her in the position of an acharya who can lead us to the Divine. The spiritual beauty associated with an acharya is further enhanced by her constant union with Lord Rangaraja. An image of loveliness this, when the Lord is compared to a divine sandalwood tree. This is sweet to contemplate upon, the scent of spiritual atmosphere, life-sustaining and soul-ennobling, the presence so close to us in the lotus of our heart!

Vedanta Desika uses the word "yogadrusya" to explain the beauty of this divine union. The beauty is beyond mere mental planes of consciousness. This union is a yogic union, the symbol union which defies description as it belongs to the state of visionary experience. Through the steps of rasanubhava and atmanubhava, this yogic union helps the sadhak ascend the ladders of yoga. In fact, a time comes when the ascension does not call for any effort from us. Once we are ready to contemplate upon the Divya Dampati by offering saranagati the magnetic attraction of the divine Loveliness draws us towards it till we touch the throne of Ananta and receive the full impact of divine grace. We then find our identity with God.

*'A sealed identity within her woke;
She knew herself the Beloved of the Supreme.
The Master and the Mother of all lives
Watching the worlds their twin regard had made,
And Krishna and Radha for ever entwined in bliss,
The Adorer and Adored self-lost and one'.*

-Sri Aurobindo. (Savitri)

Goda Devi who confers bliss upon yogic contemplatives is equally concerned with helping the errant and the forlorn. As a mother whose patience is directed always towards the way-ward child, Godadevi is full of patience (kshama) while dealing with her children. In this aspect she is an avatar of Mother Earth. Man wounds Mother Earth in a million ways, seeks to destroy her potentialities by sinful greed and murderous over-kill, poisons

her atmosphere in hundreds of ways, desecrates her with every action of his in the name of science and technology; yet, Mother Earth's patience seems inexhaustible. She forgives, forgets and even evolves new ways of sustaining her children. Such is the patience of Goda Devi who is prepared to give us one more chance and yet one more to reform ourselves, all the while refusing to condemn even the worst offender to a permanent Hell.

This divine patience is accompanied by divine compassion. Goda Devi is like Mother Lakshmi, who constantly intercedes in our behalf and sees to it that the judge in God does not give us too heavy a punishment. Vedanta Desika who holds on to this central pillar of Sri Vaishnavism – the compassion of the Divine Mother – has written hundreds of verses on the subject. The long poem, *Daya Satakam* is about the mysterious ways of Mercy (daya) who is imaged as the Queen of the Lord, "the inner being of God". The Tirupati Hill is verily like a solidified form of the Mother's compassion and even the Lord appears subservient to this Daya Devi. In fact, but for Mother Compassion, Karuna, how would it be possible for us to reach out to the true Lord? She is like the expert jeweller helping an ignorant person to choose a precious gem in the market.

"The scriptures are the jewel-market and God, a precious gem. One may miss this priceless gem in the glitter of various shining stones. But it is the grace Divine that spots out like a jeweller, the priceless ruby, to offer it to the prapanna, the humblest of the humbles". (*Daya Satakam*, verse 39, Tr. Satyavrata Singh).

This "deep of compassion", this "hushed sanctuary", this Godadevi is our only refuge.

Sri Goda Stuti - 2

*"Mother Goda Devi! Your fame
Cannot be measured
Even by all the Vedas.
How then can my song
Hope to equal the task?"*

Knowing this, I wish to be silent.

But your rare qualities

Shatter my vow of silence

Making me dare to speak".

Goda Devi was, of course, a foster-child of Vishnuchitta in Kali Yuga. She experienced happiness and sorrow, anxiety and fulfilment in her mortal frame. She wrote lilting Tamil poems that are sung in all temples dedicated to Vishnu. The *Tiruppavai* and *Nachiyar Tirumozhi* written in historical time are part of the Sri Vaishnava Darsana.

But, then, it is not as though Goda Devi is a mere historical figure. She was actually an incarnation of the Divine Mother who is praised in grace-laden Suktas in the Vedas. Vedanta Desika would like us to remember this divine-human personality of Goda Devi all the time. The Supreme Mother is praised in the Vedas through many suktas like Sraddha, Medha, Aditi, Vak, Sri, Bhu and Neela. The Vaishnava sampradaya gives particular importance to the Sri, Bhu and Neela suktas. Of these, the Sri sukta delineates Lakshmi through sublime epithets such as golden-sheened (hiranya varna), doe-like (harini), joy-giving (chandra), refuge (Sri), brilliant (jvalanti), compassionate (ardhra) and guardian-angel (pushkarini). The Sri Sukta is in the form of a prayer to the Lord as the Giver of the Vedas (Jata Vedas) to grant the devotee a vision of the Divine Mother.

If the glory and grandeur of Lakshmi-tattva is the main significance of Sri Sukta, the Bhu Sukta takes us straight to the Patience of the Mother Lakshmi (bhoomna bhumih) who is the creator and increaser (Vasundhara) of Prosperity, and who takes special care of her ignorant children (andho parisati). The brief Neela Sukta envisions Mother as the consort of Vishnu, the paraclete who takes us to the Divine. The terms 'ghritavati' and 'payasvati' (maker of ghee and milk) connote the association with the term Nappinnai, Krishna's consort eulogised in the *Tiruppavai*. Tradition speaks of Goda Devi as an incarnation of Bhu Devi and Neela Devi. It is obvious that the Vedas have sought in vain to exhaust

the auspicious qualities of the Mother. After the Vedic Rishis and several great poets have sought to describe the qualities of the Divine Mother, Valmiki has devoted one whole epic to the attempt (Sitayah charitam mahat). Nearer our own time, Alavandar's (Yamunacharya) Chatuh-sloki may be said to have initiated a renaissance in Sri Vaishnavism. Vedanta Desika himself had written an exegesis of Alavandar's work. Ramanuja, Srivatsanga Misra and several other scholar-devotees have sung the Mother's praise. Still her qualities of compassion and grace have not been exhausted. Thus, where the mantric verses of these savants have not proved equal to the task, can Vedanta Desika hope to succeed? Silence alone is his refuge.

But Goda Devi will not allow him to be silent. In fact, is she also not the Goddess of Learning, the Vak of the Vedas? To her devotee, she gives the gifts of knowledge, speech, poesy. She is the power behind the Vedas.

*"Yes, I myself say this, – and these my words
must needs be welcome to the Devas and men –
One whom I love I make mighty – make of him
A Brahmana, a Rishi, a gifted man".* (Tr. A.C. Bose)

It is this Vedic deity that is now come in human garb to indite some of the sweetest parts of the Tamil scriptures (Tamil Marai). Goda Devi's *Nachiyar Tirumozhi* and *Tiruppavai* have a special niche of their own in the Prabhandha literature. If the other alvars are rich in wisdom and ripe in experience, Goda Devi's poems win by their sheer simplicity and melodic beauty. The *Tirumozhi* enacts the nayaka-nayaki bhava with ease and in the course of 143 verses gives her spiritual autobiography that goes through several phases the vicissitudes of desire, the "existential shock" of meeting the Lord, the pangs of separation, the despair of rejection and the Pisgah Heights of Fulfilment. And when one learns to recite 'in the proper order' the 30 verses of *Tiruppavai*, one is rewarded with divine grace.

As Vedanta Desika looks at Goda Devi and remembers her countless qualities of pity, compassion, patience and wisdom, the

divine qualities press upon his consciousness forcing his silence to disintegrate. Unconscious of himself and his surroundings, he begins to sing in her praise. Such is her divine tyranny. P. Sri, the renowned Vaishnava scholar, draws our attention to an interesting tradition. Vedanta Desika was observing his usual vow of silence in the evening of the Trayodasi when he went to Srivillipputtur for the Vasantotsava. The supernal beauty of Goda Devi's royal advent on the streets of the city made him give up his vow and he is said to have burst out in song.

Once he begins, there is no hesitance nor conscious deliberation. When the divine afflatus seizes the devotee, poesy comes pouring out with a bang (sahasa eve):

".....all genius comes from Overhead; for genius is the entry or inrush of a greater consciousness into the mind or a possession of the mind by a greater power. Every operation of genius has at its back or infused within it an intuition, a revelation, an inspiration, an illumination, or at the least a hint or touch or influx from some greater power or level of conscious being than those which men ordinarily possess or use". (Sri Aurobindo)

The universal Ananda in the form of Goda Devi inspires Vedanta Desika in a like manner. Bowing to the welcome defeat, he now proceeds to pray for her Grace to see him through the task.

Sri Goda Stuti -3

*"O Mother Goda Devi!
Grant me the power to compose
In crystalline and sweet words
A prayer to praise you
That would be nectarean to the Lord's ears,
And rhythmically appropriate
To the sound of your bejewelled anklets,
In words worthy of your greatness".*

Nammalvar speaks of the Lord as praising Himself through the tongue of his devotee.

*"The Lord of Tirumaliruncolai
Has pervaded the universe; he is all life.
He has become me. He praises Himself.
He is honey, milk, sugar-candy, nectar;
Ah, he has devoured me!"*

Indeed, to attain our goal which is the Lord, the Lord himself has to show the way. As the mother teaches her child to reverence the parents and walk the path of righteousness, Goda Devi has to teach Vedanta Desika to move cautiously and yet confidently in his task. Hence he calls her 'mother' (janani) in this verse. Alavandar before him had also approached the Mother in a like manner, as a dasa and a prapanna. And She never fails her children. Assured of her help, Vedanta Desika speaks of the kind of word-power he would like to receive as the Mother's gift.

The words should be pleasing not merely to the Mother but the Lord as well. In fact, that is the ultimate goal. The Mother is but the 'purushakara bhuta', one who speaks on our behalf to the Lord, a vital connection indicated by the Tirumantra. She is not different from the Lord except that she does not have His sternness as a Judge. She is all-compassion and even helps save the evil ones from the Lord's severity. But for her presence as an intermediary, where would we be? We humans seem to do little that is straightforward, right and helpful. We revel in wilful destruction, find enjoyment in corrupting others and ourselves and are generally a mass of ignorance, superstition, inertia and evil. If we are still redeemed, it is only because of the Mother. "May I be guarded by Neela Devi whose sensuousness like an eye-mote prevents Lord Srinivasa from noticing the faults of the devotee", sings Vedanta Desika in *Daya Satakam*. And the *Sri Vachana Bhushana* also speaks in the same tone. "When the Lord's anger is roused by the sins of man like fire out of water, He forgives only because of her (poruppathu ivalukkaha)".

Hence the request for a choice of words that would prove nectarean to the Lord's ears. Again, if the significance of the words should be nectarean, the outer garb too should be on the rails of

rasanubhava. Rhythm should be as perfect as the soul of the Mother's anklets. She never moves out of step, even if she traverses forests along with her Lord. King Janaka had referred to this explicitly; "She is devoted to her husband and walks in step with him, following him as a shadow does substance" *pativrataa mahabhaga chaye vanugataa sadaa*.

The Mother's anklets are part of the devotee's consciousness, for his meditation is centered on the Mother's feet whether awake or asleep. A sense of the Mother's approaching footsteps gives the prapanna an accession of self-confidence, power and joy. The anklets of the Mother thus become the definite source of identification when the devotee is in search of the divine. Hence Lakshmana's words in the *Ramayana*:

*"I do not recognise the anklets
Nor the ear-rings.
But these anklets I know very well
As I have worshipped her feet daily".*

The best music for the devotee's ears is the sound of the divine anklets that betoken the approaching Grace. Such sublime, life-giving, soul-enthraling music should be the prayer to the Mother. Even as the Lord is delighted when He hears the anklet-bells of the Mother, He would receive with joy the verses that produce an identical sound.

The words have to be prasanna: pure, clear, pellucid, transparent. They should convey exactly the surging joy within the devotee's heart as he gazes upon the vision of Lakshmi and Narayana, as it happened with the first three Alvars when they came face to face with the Divya Dampati. Thus Pey Alwar:

*"I have seen today Lakshmi;
The golden figure of Narayana
That is brilliant as the sun's disc;
The golden discus that is fiery in war;
And the conch Panchajanya".*

Finally, the words should be madhura (sweet), for they are to reach the Lord of Mathura who is all-sweet, all-joy, all-love.

The sin of a prayer like this is to generate sweetness and joy, to be a rain-laden cloud of happiness (inba maari). Such has been Nammalvar's poetry which transcreated the Vedas into Tamil. As for Goda Devi's poetry, they are limpid chants fashioned in the style of madhura bhakti. The *Thiruppavai* is famous not only for its devotional content, but also for projecting the sweet ingredients of Tamil aesthesis as seen in Aham poetry. A grammatical work like *Maranalankaram* fondly refers to Goda Devi as 'the maid of Villiputtur, authoress of *Thiruppavai* (Villiputtur Selvi).' It is natural for Desika to aspire for such word-power, so that his sweet verses would be appropriate to a sweet deity like Goda Devi. Her life was one long sweet offering to Krishna and Desika's prayer seems to indicate a received assurance; that the contemplation of Goda Devi's madhura bhakti as indicated in *Tiruppavai* and *Tirumozhi* would itself bring a flow of sweetness to his poetry. *Yad bhavam tad bhavati!*

Sri Goda Stuti - 4

*"O Goda Devi! The river Yamuna
Is famous due to Krishna's association;
Your literary works are great
As they are associated with Krishna too.
Poets learn of their significances
From learned teachers. Presently
By your grace, honeyed poetry
Flows from their pen as well."*

The fourth verse is itself an example of what it seeks to convey. Goda Devi's grace-laden glance at the poet has already begun to work for the verse entwines the names of four holy rivers at a glance: Krishna, Yamuna, Godavari and Saraswati are the *teerthas* that purify us. This is an incidental lovely trick of the poetic eye which is actually glancing at the exploits of the Blue-sheened Lord (Krishna) who is the subject of the compositions (Saraswati) of Andal (Goda) which are explained to Acharyas (*teerthai*). Vedanta Desika's reference to the yeoman services of the Acharyas in unveiling to us the coiled significances of the

poems of the Alvars is important. At a time when the world had almost totally forgotten the existence of the Tamil scriptures, the Divya Prabhandha, it was the acharyas who discovered and disseminated this spiritual treasure-trove.

Sri Nathamuni, the first of the line of Vaishnava Acharyas at Srirangam, was a music wizard. Once he happened to hear some pilgrims recite the ten verses of Nammalvar's *Tiruvaimozhi* dedicated to Lord Aravamudan of Kumbakonam. The Acharya was seized by the beauty and musical tonality of the poems. As the pilgrims did not know the rest of the *Tiruvaimozhi*, Nathamuni went to Alwar Tirunagari, the birth-place of Nammalvar. He recited regularly Madhurakavi Alvar's 'Kanninum Siruthambu' verses in praise of Nammalvar. His prayers were heard by Nammalvar who appeared in person and taught Nathamuni, the Divya Prabhandha canon. The Acharya anthologised the verses under appropriate headings and spread their message far and wide. The Acharyas who succeeded him – Uyyakondar, Manakkal Nambi, Alavandar, Peria Nambi, Ramanuja, Srivatsanga Misra, Embar, Bhattar and several more – explained the Sri Vaishnava Darsana through the *Divya Prabhandha* and helped devotees gain a vision of the Divine by meditating upon the verses. Vedanta Desika implies that but for these Acharyas who understood the heart of the Tamil Scripture, the worlds of scholarship and poesy would have remained ignorant of the message of the Alvars.

The greatness of those hymns rises from the fact of their association with Krishna. Even as Krishna leela took place on the banks of the river Yamuna whose pellucid, darkling waters reflected the divine drama, the translucent words of the alvars reflect the exploits of the Lord. In Perialvar's works we watch Gokula in ecstasy as Krishna is born and then follows the growth of the divine child step by step. The babe in the cradle, the 'chandamama' stage, the rhythmic shaking of head (Chenkeerai), the clapping of hands (Sappani), the first hesitant steps (talar nadai), games (appoochi) and so on. Presently he is the prankster, and Yasodha is flooded with complaints from the gopikas. The flute-player of Brindavan, the eternal lover Krishna, is seen in the verses of

Goda Devi. And when Tirumangai Alvar and Nammalvar take up the "Aham" style of Tamil poetics used hitherto to describe only mundane love, aesthesis itself undergoes a complete change with the introduction of the divine love of Krishna. The mere mention of the river Yamuna evokes the figure of Krishna even as the recital of Goda Devi's *Tirumozhi* and *Tiruppavai* brings before us the entire personality of the Lord.

*"Child of north Madura! Maya incarnate,
Sporting in the holy waters of Yamuna!
Lustrous lamp of the cowherd clan!
Purifier of your mother's womb! Damodara!
If we but approach you with purity,
Worship you with flowers pure,
Sing your praises with deep emotion,
And meditate upon you in our minds,
Our past errors and those to creep in later on
Will be burnt like cotton in the fire".*

(Tr. R. Bangaruswami)

The Acharyas dip their scholarly expositions of these verses in the nectar of devotion. As a result, aspirant poets are blessed with contacting the deeper meaning of the soul" which leads to a flood of poetic inspiration that is devotional in content. But there is so much of the treasure here that one could easily get lost! Even as the Mother's qualities are countless, the significances of Goda Devi's poetic creations are also infinite. Where shall the devotee begin? At the prayer to Kamadeva where Goda Devi makes the fierce vow: "I shan't live if my name is associated with a mortal husband!" Or at the juncture when she floats in a flood of sorrow failing to get the boat called Vaikuntha? Or when she recounts her unique dream? Or at Brindavan where she watches the divine cowherd? Or walk with her as she goes about waking the gopikas to go to the palace of Narayana for receiving the Parai to complete the Dhanurmasa Vrata? Goda Devi's writings are a world by themselves written in pure and sublime Tamil (tooya Tamil maaalai). The would-be poet could get quite lost in contemplating upon this incredibly brilliant universe that he could remain dumb.

But the Mother knows that the child has to be made a man. She knows that the poet has to prove himself. Hence she directs her glance at him. Her grace steadies the poet's mind which blossoms like a lotus thanks to the teachings of the Acharya. Honeyed words (makaranda muchah vachah) now rise from his creative imagination. Vedanta Desika is aware of this divine alchemy and hence his complete surrender to Goda Devi as he dares to confine her greatness within the limitations of language.

Sri Goda Stuti - 5

*"Doing wrong has ever been our way.
Yet, if we continue to be redeemed
It is because the Lord is bound
By the garland presented to Him
By you, after wearing the same,
And by the garland of your verses
Which have sweet word-combinations
That sound like the strings of a lute".*

'Apakrutau chira deekshitaanam': wrong-doing has been our vow! History teaches us nothing, life teaches us nothing. Has man ceased to covet property of others even after watching the fate of Duryodhana? Has man decided not to lay hands on innocent women ever, after learning of the violent end of Ravana and Dushshasana? Has man learnt to avoid telling a lie in spite of what happened to Yudhistira himself? Has man given up pride after the fall of Nahusha? Has man stopped fiddling with atomic weaponry even after the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

*"Once a companion of the sacred Fire,
The mortal perishes of God and Light,
An adversary governs heart and brain,
A nature hostile to the Mother-force.
The self of life yields up its instruments
To Titan and demoniac agencies
That aggrandise earth-nature and disframe".*

(Sri Aurobindo, Savitri)

But which mother will neglect her autistic child, her mentally-retarded offspring, her son who engages himself in a suicide attempt? The unique feature of motherhood is this compassionate love which constantly tries to save and also make the child a normal human being. The normal nature of man is to possess a loving and devotional heart. For devotion, love for God, leads to wisdom. Such is the philosophy of Sri Vaishnavism propounded by Nammalvar and others. It is when man becomes a stranger to bhakti that he loses his strength, wisdom and happiness and descends into an abnormal state. The Divine Mother knows the crux of the problem. Her child can be cured if time and patience are aplenty. Therefore, she intercedes with the Lord and begs Him not to condemn man in haste and she even gains time by diverting the Lord's attention.

How? By making Him forget Himself, by imprisoning Him within the folds of a double-garland of sweetness. This double garland of flowers and poesy (poomalai and paamaalai) is the unique contribution of Goda Devi. The "Taniyan" for *Tiruppavai* speaks of the Lord as resting in contented joy with Neela Devi while Goda Devi wakes Him up with her matin song announcing her desire to serve Him and at the same time merges with Him by binding Him with her flower garland (svochchishtaayaam sraja nigalitham). Vedanta Desika takes his cue from this verse to say that the Lord is bound by her garland (mowli dhamna niyamitah) which has given her the name, Soodikodutha Nachiyar. Whereas in the entire world of religious devotion it is the devotee who receives the garland worn by the Lord and who thus binds himself to divine service, in the case of Goda Devi alone the action moves in the reverse. The Lord receives the devotee's garland and imprisons Himself in her band of love: Such is the relationship of the Divya Dampati, a fact underlined by Tyagaraja when he sings of Rama as being "a parrot in the cage of Sita's bhakti" (Bhama Bhaktiyanu panjarapu chilaka). The Mother is the first among the Lord's devotees and she is also the first Acharya. The Lord binds Himself to the Acharya's ways and allows Himself to be manipulated by the Acharya in the manner most favourable for the aspirant soul.

If Goda Devi prepared garlands with a variety of lovely scented blossoms to adorn Vatapatrasayi, she also prepared verse garlands with sweet and significant words (*madhurai giram nikumbhaih*). As among devotees Goda Devi is unique, she is also unique among the Alvars. The Alvars followed the path of devotion. Sometimes they prayed as supplicants, sometimes as helpless children and quite often they used the *nayaka-nayaki bhava* to give expression to their welling aspiration for a tryst with the divine. Tirumangai alvar and Nammalvar had to superimpose the personality of a pining girl on their hearts for the purpose.

For Goda Devi there is no such problem of imposed identity. Her bridal mysticism flows with a natural ease. The mesmerising effect of the words formed by the love welling from her heart is like the music from the strings of a lute tuned aright. The 143 verses in her *Tirumozhi* are musical and meaningful. As for the marvellous *Tiruppavai*, no words of praise have been found adequate to praise it through the centuries. Thus K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar:

"Tiruppavai with its doubling of the human and the Divine, its mingling of girlish spontaneity and spiritual sublimity, its perfect harmonising of Man, Nature and God, and its sheer poetic beauty and melodic richness, is a supreme masterpiece of devotional and mystic poetry".

Is it then surprising that the Lord who is the best of *rasikas* finds himself completely under the spell of Goda Devi's poesy?

Sri Goda Stuti - 6

*"Goda Devi! You have red lips,
Rising breasts auspicious;
In the flow of your compositions,
Goddess of learning incarnate;
Full of sattwic qualities,
You eschew the harshness of rajas;
A garland of your twin works*

*You offer to the Lord;
A veritable joy-companion you are
Wittily conversing with Him".*

Vedanta Desika is in his element here. A renowned scholar, he was certainly the Lord of Sanskrit language. A precocious child, he is also said to have been blessed with a phenomenal memory and was a walking encyclopaedia of Sanskrit and Tamil literature as well as the Sastras in these languages. He was also conversant with the Jain, Carvaka and Buddhist systems. An expert in Sanskrit grammar and Sanskrit philosophy of speech (Sphota vada) he was a master of Sanskrit prosody. Indulging in sloka kavya was an early love that continued to be his favourite even in the latter part of his literary career. The fifth verse of the *Goda Stuti* is a fine example of Vedanta Desika's use of slesa.

The double entendre in this verse brings to us the images of the lovely, brilliant, witty Goda Devi and the several holy rivers of India each of which has its own beauty. Goda Devi has lips that are red (Sona): she is the life-giving Son river. Her breasts rise auspiciously (tunga bhadra); she is the noble Tungabhadra. She is the Goddess of Learning (Saraswati); she is also the Vedic river of that name. She has no trace of rajas (viraja) in her being; she is also the holy river Viraja which flows beyond this mundane world. She offers the Lord a garland of (goda) her twin literary creations, the *Tirumozhi* and the *Tiruppavai*; she is also seen as the grand river Godavari. She converses with the Lord in terms of wit and humour (Narmada), spreading Ananda consciousness everywhere; she is also the auspicious river Narmada. Viewed through this verse, Goda Devi is like the holy rivers who cleanse us of our sins, sustain us and bring us joy and fulfilment.

Each of the rivers mentioned here by Vedanta Desika is associated with life and literature in India in some way or the other. The Son brings to us the vivid scene in the *Balakanda* where Viswamitra, his entourage, Rama and Lakshmana pitch their tent on their way to Mithila. Viswamitra then tells them the story of the fire-willed daughters of Kusanabha and how their filial obe-

dience and chastity were rewarded in the end. Tungabhadra is the Pampa of the *Ramayana* (the modern Hampi). Saraswati is one of the seven rivers of the Vedic times and is associated with 'divine inspiration'. The Viraja river is familiar to Hindu puranic lore. Incidentally, tradition gives the name Viraja to Goda Devi's foster mother. Godavari brings to the mind the great crossing in the *Ramayana* and the incandescent devotion of Guha. Narmada is as holy and great and long as the Ganga and the Godavari, and is said to have laughed in sport when she danced on the body of gods.

Vedanta Desika implies that the names of the rivers used as epithets to Goda Devi also apply to her *Tirumozhi* and *Tiruppavai*. The two verse garlands have been given to us by the coral-red lips of Goda Devi and are as lovely. They are couched in noble sentiments like the need for total surrender and a mere recital is auspicious for our material and spiritual well-being.

*"If we praise Him who stretched Himself
To measure the three worlds,
And offer our worship,
Thrice a month will rain shower
For the good of the world,
And fish will skip
In the well-grown paddy fields,
And bees sleep in flowery beds,
And the big generous cows,
Milked by their long teats,
Will profusely fill the ports
And give us ample wealth".*

The poems are literally Saraswati's dwelling-places. Perusing them in meditative absorption frees us from rajasic qualities and induces a sattvic temperament making us worthy servants of Narayana. These verse clusters are also lyric garlands that can never fade as the Lord enjoys the various approaches to him made by Goda Devi and accepts her devotional love; the prayer to the God of Love (Kama), the little girls at play (Sitri), the stealing of the clothes, the game of circles (koodal), the cuckoo-messenger,

the great dream, the address to the divine conch, the cloud-messenger, the several phases of the soul's aspiration, the vision in Brindavan and the Dhanurmasa Vrata in *Tiruppavai*. The soul-sweetening scent of devotion that rises from these poems is ever the delight of the aspirant soul.

Finally, the gentle humour of Goda Devi, especially in *Tiruppavai*, (verse 9 to 15) adds a rare quality to her writings and Vedanta Desika has perceived well this as 'narmada asi nama'.

Sri Goda Stuti - 7

*"Valmiki who was born
Out of an ant-hill on Mother Earth,
Yourself,
Became the Emperor of Poesy.
Why then be surprised
That these honeyed writings
Which rise from your lotus-like face
Are sweet beyond compare?"*

The *Ramayana* is closely associated with the Sri Vaishnava Darsana. The Alvars sing of Rama's exploits again and again, and one of the most moving lyric sequences in the *Divya Prabandham* describes the sorrow of Dasaratha as he lies on his death-bed watching the chariot of Rama moving away at a distance. The author, Kulasekhara, has also written a 'brief Ramayana' ('Angan Nedu Madhil').

The great classic commentators like Peria Achan Pillai, Nanjeeyar, Nampillai, Alagiya Manavalapperumal Jeeyar, Vadakku Tiruveedhi Pillai, Nainachariar, Tiruvaimozhi Pillai, Manavala Mamuni and Vedanta Desika were all scholars in Sanskrit and close students of the *Ramayana*. Phrases from Valmiki are strewn with a prodigal hand throughout the *manipravala* commentaries. Peria Achan Pillai and Vedanta Desika have also written commentaries on choice verses from the *Ramayana* to explain the theory of surrender and unfailing Grace in the light of Visishtadvaita. The latter's 'Abhaya Pradana Saara' is a classic.

As a sahridaya, Desika's first love was the *Ramayana* and Valmiki stood at the apex of Sanskrit poetry. The Adi Kavya inspired Desika to write the gem of a poem *Hamsa Sandesam* and several other lyrics like the *Raghuveera Gadya*. Thus, Valmiki for Desika as indeed for all of us, is the Emperor of Poesy (Kavi Sarvabhoutma).

The traditional accounts make Valmiki a 'child' of Bhu Devi. It was when he had remained in self-lost yogic contemplation of the Rama nama for a timeless period that Valmiki had been covered by an ant-hill. An ant-hill is known as the 'ear' of the earth. Valmiki became the child of Mother Earth so he emerged from her ear. Her child's exploit has been quite, quite overwhelming.

"The work of Valmiki has been an agent of incalculable power in the moulding of the cultural mind of India; it has been presented to it to be loved and imitated in figures like Rama and Sita, made so divinely and with such a revelation of reality as to become objects of enduring cult and worship, or like Hanuman, Lakshmana, Bharata the living human image and of its ethical ideals; it has fashioned much of what is best and sweetest in the national character, and it has evoked and fixed in it those finer and exquisite yet firm soul-tones and that more delicate humanity of temperament which are a more valuable thing than the formal outsides of virtue and conduct".

(Sri Aurobindo, Foundation of Indian Culture.)

Such is the achievement of a child of Mother Earth. Indian culture owes its source, strength and sustenance to the Adi Kavi. It is then no surprise that the poetry of Valmiki's mother should be the favourite of Narayana Himself.

Vedanta Desika likens *Tirumozhi* and *Tiruppavai* to honey (makaranda nibhah) which are indited by the lotus-like face of Goda Devi (Vaktra aravinda). This divine lotus will blossom only in the presence of the Divine Sun, Narayana. And the Lord's rays plunge through every pore of the lotus making it nobler and brighter. The rays of the Lord's name help such verse sound sweet, as the subject is Krishna's personality. Thus Goda Devi in *Tiruppavai*:

*"Wake up, you girl, and drink the resounding name of Hari
Proclaimed by the slowly waking munis and yogis
Whose hearts are filled with the glories of the Lord
Who sleeps on the snake-bed on the mighty Flood,
And who drank Puthana's life out of her breasts
And kicked to death the wheel-shaped Asura".*

(Tr. R. Bangaruswami)

Even as Valmiki is the emperor of Poesy, Goda Devi is the Empress of Bhakti. Historically speaking, the Bhakti cult began with the Alvars. It was given to Ramanuja, known as 'Tiruppavai Jeer' because of his fondness for this matin song of the Divine, to tour all over India and spread the Sri Vaishnava Darsana. The 'Guruparampara Prabhavam' speaks of Ramanuja's travels upto Kashmir to propagate the *Divya Prabhandham*. By 11th century A.D., Ramanuja's travels had begun yielding fruit. Two centuries later, Vedanta Desika's Sanskrit works explaining *Tiruvaimozhi* and other hymns helped strengthen the influence of the Alvars on the North Indian psyche. At the close of 14th century Ramananda's advent made the 'Bhagavata caste' a large family in North India, bringing into its fold even Muslims and Harijans. Ramananda was the direct influence for devotional singers like Kabir, Nanak, Chaitanya, Tulasi Das and Mira Bai. Mira's teacher Raidas was a direct disciple of Ramananda. It is a tribute to the steady, pellucid and undisturbed flow of the Prabhandha literature through so many teachers across the centuries that Mira's songs reflect Goda Devi in almost all details. Mira also speaks in terms of madhura bhakti, which includes aspiration, waiting, despair and the visionary dream of a marriage with the Lord. When Mira asks for the Lord's Tulasi garland to cure her madness, one can hear echoes of Goda Devi.

*"He alone is my true Bridegroom,
Who sits as life in the heart of creation.
I cast aside all rich garments, necklaces and jewellery,
And delight in wearing the tulasi garland
which pleases my dear Giridhar.
I paint my forehead with a tilak, and
dwell amongst His saints whom I deem
as my kith and kin".*

(Tr. Bankey Bihari)

As the limpid source of such *Tiruppavai* scenes of *sat-sangha* all over India through the ages, is not our Goda Devi the Empress of the Bhakti Marga?

Sri Goda Stuti - 8

*"Mother Goda Devi;
Desiring to enjoy the Lord's presence,
Your elders thought of their devotion
As love, and brought to the feeling
Its attendant states of pining and union;
With such an approach
They flood their hearts with love".*

The Vaishnava philosophy speaks of the Supreme Lord as the only Purusha. All the others, the *jeevatmas*, irrespective of their sex, are considered to possess the attributes of a female. This facilitates the smooth flow of *madhura bhakti*. The *nayaka-nayaki bhava* of the Alvars was the first attempt to approach the Divine in a novel manner. Fraught with uncertainties, it was yet boldly attempted and triumphantly executed. The style of the Alvars originated from the ancient Aham poetry of the Tamils.

The basic text of Tamil aesthetics is *Tolkappiyam*. It speaks of two major divisions: Aham and Puram. Aham refers to the interior or inner life of man, whereas Puram comprehends his outer life. Aham poetry is chiefly love poetry while Puram covers the race's heroic life. Aham and Puram have further sub-divisions, but of course nothing is too rigid, and due allowance is made for 'tinai-mayakkam' (confusion of categories). Tamil Sangham anthologies like *Ahananooru*, *Purananooru*, *Kalithogai* and *Einkurunooru* celebrate mortal love and mortal heroism within the prescribed categories, leaping now and then into a shower of incandescent poetry.

Nammalvar (to be followed by Tirumangai later on) ushered in a new era in the cultural and spiritual life of Tamil Nadu by making use of the existing Tamil aesthetics to sing of God. Narayana took the place of the war-hero and king described in

Puram poetry. And the love between mortals found in Aham poetry was subsumed into a love of the human for the Divine.

Tiruviruttam is an excellent example of Nammalvar's use of Tamil Aham poetics. Aham has seven major categories: Kaikkilai, Kurinchi, Mullai, Palai, Marudam, Neytal and Peruntinai. Mullai is the main plank for *Tiruviruttam* which has as its presiding deity Tirumal or Vishnu. The landscape is forest and pasture, the rainy season marks the interior progression, and 'konrai' blooms and flowing rivers give a keener outline to the poet's meditative moods. Among cowherds grazing cattle and beneath the dark clouds that envision Krishna, Nammalvar calls upon us to become the flame of aspiration symbolised by the heroine of *Tiruviruttam* who is Jiva, the soul, struggling to reach the Divine. Thus the Aham aesthetics of *Tiruviruttam* becomes a vehicle for Visishtadvaita philosophy. For the Visishtadvaitin, the distinctiveness of soul and matter from Brahman is real, and hence this poetry is no more allegory and there is an utter reality about the heroine's passion.

*"Like a righteous king who ruled gloriously
And died, the sun has vanished. O great Lord!
You've left me alone to suffer. Vouchsafe
Your grace. The night grows torturously long".*

Like Nammalvar who imagines himself to be a lady in love, Tirumangai Alvar makes use of the Aham style to indicate his love for the Divine. He takes up the 'madal' (letter) category and writes two 'open letters' to Lord Narayana as from a maiden who is prepared to undergo public disgrace and even die in the bargain. K.C. Varadachari summarises the significance of Tirumangai's *bhava* thus:

"The *madal* however is a threat to God, for its intention seems to be to show to the world that God is not the *saranagata rakshaka*, the saviour of the refugee, nor is He *sulabha*, easily accessible, a threat which is fortunately never treated by God as not worth taking notice of. God's assurance to the soul that loves Him alone and to whom the soul has totally dedicated itself, is of

greatest spiritual value to the soul, and it is on this truth of God's word that the *madal* revolves. The assurances are contained in the Bhagvad Gita verse (XVIII, 66): Renouncing all dharmas seek refuge in Me alone".

Vedanta Desika points out that the several states of mystic love (*uchchavachaihi viraha sangamajaihi*) such as aspiration, rejection, the dark night of the soul, yearning, prostration and vision had to be imagined first by the Alvars so that they could get into the mood of *madhura bhakti*. Only later could they come face to face with God while floating in that sweet mood.

Goda Devi is a natural exception. Being a child brought up by Vishnuchitta in an atmosphere of Narayana worship, she had deeply inhaled Krishna consciousness. As she grew up to be a lovely maiden, all the emotions of a young girl which are associated with youth fully impinged upon her consciousness. With this difference, Her goal was no mortal hero but the immortal Diamond, the glistening lamp of the cowherd clan. Hence, the poetry that rose from her anguished heart in search of the Lord came out with a rare sincerity and beauty of *sringara rasa*, with a special authenticity unequalled by others:

*"What is the use of austerities
That allow not my rising breasts
To serve Lord Govinda
In this birth? What use of it beyond?
If He would gather me unto Himself
For just a moment, and then give me up,
Even that perhaps could be borne!"*

Sri Goda Stuti - 9

*"Mother! As one born to Vishnuchitta
And granting life-giving nectar
Through your speech,
As another figure of the moon
In removing the heat of life,
People recognise you as a sister
Of Lakshmi who rose from the sea".*

Goda Devi's place in the Sri-tattva is the subject of this verse. Goda Devi is also Sri; her *Tiruppavai* is known as Sri Giti. Though near to earthly life as one who lived as a daughter of Vishnuchitta of Srivilliputtur, Goda Devi was always intimate with heaven which was her natural home. Tradition speaks of her as an incarnation of Bhu Devi and Neela Devi, sister-goddesses of Lakshmi. This is because there are close affinities between the personalities of Goda Devi and Sri Devi. Vedanta Desika mentions just one or two of them and in a trice we recognise in Perialvar's daughter Lakshmi herself.

Goda Devi was born (samuthitavati) to Vishnuchitta. Sri Devi was born in the ocean which contains in its centre Lord Vishnu (ati Vishnuchittam). Such *slesa* is, of course, child's play to Vedanta Desika. He proceeds to compare Goda Devi to the moon. Like her who was born to Vishnuchitta, the moon is also, according to puranic tradition, a child of the Lord's mind (Vishnuchitta). The moon gives us delight and immortality as nectar flows from it in a stream. Sri Aurobindo explaining the symbolism of Soma in the Vedic riks says:

"As the wine of delight he flows about and enters into this great march of the sacrifice which is the progress of man from the physical to the superconscient. He enters into it and encompasses it wearing the cloud of the heavenly ether, *nabhas*, the mental principle, as his robe and veil.....The divine delight comes to us wearing the luminous cloudy veil of the forms of mental experience".

(On the Veda)

In the same manner, Goda Devi's verses also proceed from her like a stream of nectar and helps us in our sadhana like the Vedic Soma. We are ordinary mortals who have learnt that there is a path which can take us from the mundane to the cosmic. We have heard the matin song that wakes us from our tamasic, earth-sleep and shows us the joy of serving Narayana and receiving His Grace. Later, what had started as a mental experience of a few gopikas rising in the morning for a ritual bath and prayer turns out to be altogether a different experience. This is a group of devotees, sadhakas, who have woken up in the twilight of spiritual life

and are meditating upon the Lord, bathing their minds in the flood of the Lord's personality. And the Parai is going to be not a mere drum used for the Dhanurmasa vrata, nor even the Purusharthas, but the right to serve the Lord for all time to come.

*"This the significance of our waking early
Coming to You and worshipping Your lotus feet;
Born in the cowherd clan
You must accept our humble services.
Not for immediate boons have we come.
O Govinda, for seven generations seven,
We will be devoted to You and serve You alone.
Cancel all the other desires in us".*

(Tr. R. Bangaruswami)

Such loving service for all time to come alone can assure us the delight of existence and save us from the heat and dust of life. Goda Devi's writings are such nectar to transform our lives. Hence she can indeed be compared to the moon.

Besides, Goda Devi is also beautiful as the cool moon (himarucheh anyasurti). The mere sight of Goda Devi as she stands in self-lost absorption wearing the garlands that are to be offered to Vatapatrasayi, and as we see her *utsava vigraha* today in the 'stapana Gopala mancha' in the Srivillipputtur temple and gather into our hearts her smile, her lovely tresses bunched up in a decorative mass, her bejewelled figure and the parrot in her hand, we gain the vision of her 'archa murti', Sudikkoduthar, we lose all sense of time, we lose ourselves in the waves of ecstasy that is pure Ananda consciousness. This figure is all-beautiful, all-merciful, that is soothing, comforting. A veritable form of the caressing, cool moon.

As the moon that has risen from the sea is considered to be a brother of Lakshmi, Goda Devi too can be considered a sister of Lakshmi (payodhi duhituh sahaja).

This verse harks back to the Sri Sukta which describes the Supreme Mother as Chandra, the giver of Ananda consciousness; Prabhasa, one who has the rays of light; Yasasa, far-famed;

Adityavarna, one who is in the form of Vedic sounds in the Sun; and Gandhadvara, originator of all sweet scents. Singing of Goda Devi, Vedanta Desika finds that in every way she is a sister-figure of Sri. Goda Devi's patient understanding of the shortcomings of the devotees lead her to shower nectarean grace upon us. She is an image of light, the 'Sudarkodi' or 'jyotir-lata'. Her fame has endured and will be immortal. The *Tiruppavai* contains the originating sounds of the Vedas (vedangal yaavinukkum vithu) and Goda Devi is always associated with scented flowers, as if a twin-image of Lakshmi the Gandhadvara, source of all sweet scents. In every way Goda Devi is like Lakshmi, and was not Perialvar himself aware of this when he sang in anguish after she had merged with Lord Ranganatha?

*"I had but one daughter
Whom I brought up
Like a veritable Lakshmi
In unequalled fame.
The red-eyed Lord has taken her.
Will Yasodha from the large, noble family
Look after her daughter-in-law well?"*

Sri Goda Stuti - 10

*"The Lord is pleased even with
a little praise.
But hundreds of verses
Never pleased Him as much
As when your father
Presented your garland to Him.
That brought the grace
Of the unique title".*

The unique title (mahattara pada) mentioned here is 'Perialvar'. It was as the Brahmin garland-maker Vishnuchitta that Goda Devi's father was known to the world of religion and scholarship. Even when he received the Lord's grace and defeated the opponent in the Pandyan court, he was referred to only by his name, and it was as Vishnuchitta that he continued to serve the

Lord. A devotee immersed in Krishna consciousness (Alvar), Vishnuchitta had discovered a babe in his garden and brought her up like Lakshmi. Goda Devi was a learned and devoted daughter. Then a day had come when the Lord decided to take back this spiritual ray. To the sorrowing Alvar the assurance had come from the Lord: "You will henceforth be known as Peria (elder) Alvar for you have gained me as your son-in-law by giving me the garland of Goda Devi".

The pride of place in *Dīvyā Prabhandham* is now given to Perialvar. His *Tiruppallandu* is a guardian-hymn to the Lord, as if the guardian of the worlds needs to be guarded from evil! Yet, the love springing from Perialvar's heart has been that of an 'elder' to the Lord; the love of a mother. This *mātri hridayam* of Perialvar has given us the brilliant verse-groups that describe the childhood, boyhood and youth of Krishna. He is so easy to attain, if we dare to approach the Lord despite our shortcomings. It is because Perialvar has assured us that this Supreme Lord is also the gentle, pranks-loving, lovable little Krishna, the eternal flute-player of Brindavan.

Apart from these sweet hymns of Perialvar, the Lord has also received hymnal homage from other devotees. Chief among them are the other ten Alvars—Poygai, Bhuttatalvar, Pey, Tiruppan, Tirumangai, Kulasekhara, Tondaradippodi, Tirumazhisai and Nammalvar. They vie with each other in creative imagination, mystic ecstasy, devotional fervour and spiritual identity with God. But Vishnuchitta alone has been named Perialvar by the Lord. Vedanta Desika says that this is because Vishnuchitta was able to offer the Lord a garland that had received the scent of Goda Devi's tresses. Though Narayana is '*sarvagandhah*', the repository of all scents, he finds a special sweetness in the garland offered by Perialvar. This must be because the garland has been worn by Goda Devi who equals Lakshmi in all respects including the one of being the source of all sweet scents (*gandhāvara*).

Lord Narayana is easily pleased. He is a '*soumya murti*' and as Nammalvar says, one need not worry if the offering is of low value. Pure water, a smoking twig (*nanneer, puhai*), a flower:

the Lord receives the offering gaily when it comes with love. To such a Lord the Alvars had wrought poetry drenched deep in devotion. They had also done kainkarya of various kinds: Pey and Vishnuchitta had offered flowers. Tiruppan had served Narayana by adding further structures to the Srirangam temple. And all, all of them had propagated Narayana bhakti widely and deeply.

Yet, Vishnuchitta alone had become the 'Elder' Alvar for succeeding generations. This is because of Goda Devi. While other Alvars prayed, Vishnuchitta had the good fortune of bringing up Lakshmi herself. And by offering the garland worn by her to the Lord, Perialvar had approached him through Lakshmi, the safest and best method of reaching the Divine. It is the 'purushakara' of the Mother that helps us to gain Narayana's grace easily.

Hence the anguished prayer of Ramadas:

*"O mother Sita, crest-jewel of womankind,
Tell Rama to save me!
When alone with Him at night,
You softly stroke His tired limbs!"*

Pey Alvar was vouchsafed this vision of Sri Devi's importance, and he recorded it in the first verse of his 'Third Hundred'. Commenting upon it in the light of Sri Sukta, Sri K.C. Varadachari says:

"The Mother has been brought into the vision of God, and this experience has become cardinal to the entire theology of Sri Vaishnavism, which emphasises that Sri is the principle of redemptive grace which operates on and through every function of the Divine Lord-Cause. Nothing in this world is Graceless, all evil; for, at the bottom of all is the operation of purest Grace, a grace-power that is omnipotent, leading the soul to its transcendent destiny, acting as the Teacher and Mother and all"

This Mother Grace had come of her own accord to Vishnuchitta's home. And he had been granted the divine grace (anugunam prasadam) and become Perialvar.

Sri Goda Stuti - 11

*"By rare, good fortune
 The Southern direction
 Became the best
 Thanks to your birth.
 Towards that direction
 Are turned Ranganatha's eyes
 With regard, in His yogic sleep".*

The whole of India from Himalayas in the North to Cape Comorin in the South is a granary of spiritual wealth. Because of this, it has been referred to as 'the Guru of the World'. Holy places, holy rivers and holy mountains dot the map all over. The most obscure corner yet boasts of a spiritual connection with our myths and legends. Here Rama, Sita and Lakshmana rested on their way to Panchavati; there Viswamitra performed his penance to gain the title of Brahmarishi; and somewhere else Jatayu gave up his life after conveying the message of Sita's abduction; ah, right at this place lay Krishna, wounded by the hunter's arrow! Religion and spirituality, folklore and mythology, legends and literary association mark every inch of space.

The Vindhya divide this land into the Northern and Southern parts. Though this is a geographical division, people love to discuss the comparative merits of the two parts, indulging in playful raillery. Vedanta Desika, too, speaks in that tone, seeking to prove that the Southern part is not necessarily the lower part. The Vedas and the epics may have originated in the North. But it is South that has given birth to the bhakti movement! Vegavati, Kaveri and Tamraparni have spread the emerald greenery of devotion all over India. Hence, South India is the cradle of India's spiritual greatness.

It was in South India that Goda Devi was born. In his epic, Krishnadeva Raya lavishes high praise on the land of Goda Devi's birth. *Amukta Malyada* begins with a description of Srivilliputtur. High-rise buildings of gold (suvarna sowdamulu), lovely sculpture and paintings, girls singing *Divya Prabhandham* (divya

prabhandha yugaasyal draavidanganal) and at play with ball (jendu), lovely clothes, healthy crops, plantain bunches and champak trees, mango gardens, bird-chirpings, temple drums resounding, and the ringing of the bells on the temple flag-staff; these form the outer glory. But Krishnadeva Raya also describes the spiritual glory of Srivilliputtur by humanising the wisdom-treasure symbolised by Vishnuchitta in the course of a long padya (Aswasa I, verse 78). Goda Devi was brought up in this atmosphere and the birth of this incarnation in Srivilliputtur has made South India superior to all other parts (sarva utara). Her advent has indeed made South India the Guru of the world.

Vedanta Desika does not resist a pun here. Thanks to Goda Devi's coming, the Southern direction (dik dakshina) has become the Northern direction (uttara)! For 'uttara' means North as well as 'superior'. A gentle paradox!

Again, it is rather unusual for the archa murti of Vishnu to be facing the South. However, in Srirangam, when we penetrate into the Gayatri Mantapam and stand at Kulasekharan Padi to have a darshan of Ranganatha, the Lord is facing the South. Several explanations have been offered for this unusual phenomenon.

It is said that Vibhishana on his way to Lanka after the coronation of Sri Rama, decided to do *madhyanhika* on the Kaveri bank. He placed the idol of Lord Ranganatha presented to him by Rama near the Chandra Pushkarini and completed the ritual. However, he could not remove the idol afterwards. The Lord comforted the sad king of Lanka:

"I had promised the Chola king Dharmavarma to stay here. Hence, there is no need for you to sorrow. But though I am here, I shall be looking towards your kingdom in the South all the time".

Vibhishana went away satisfied but it is believed that the Chiranjeevi comes once a year to Srirangam to worship Ranganatha.

Vedanta Desika, the intense poet, has a charming explanation of his own. Ranganatha is supposed to be asleep on the

Adishesha at Srirangam. This is only a ruse and His yoganidra is actually total wakefulness. Under the guise of being asleep, the Lord is actually looking towards Srivillipputtur day and night to have a glimpse of his bride. The bridal mysticism of Goda Devi is so powerful that Vedanta Desika's figure of speech does not sound an exaggeration at all. Her poems on Ranganatha are among the finest in the *Divya Prabhandham*:

*"My Ranga is all nectar!
He has lovely tresses, a lovely mouth
Lovely eyes and a lovely navel,
From which rises the beautiful lotus!"*

She reminds Ranganatha of Krishna's gathering Rukmini to Himself; the suggestion is that Ranganatha should act like Krishna now.

*"Sisupala planned his wedding
And sought the hand of the maid;
Him did the Lord destroy
And married Rukmini;
This Lord prefers Srirangam".*

Also, the Lord has a special respect for Goda Devi. He loves her and is also proud of her. She did not give in to the ordinary passions of human beings but boldly chose the path perilous. Her life was to be of one constant dedication to the Divine and her poems were to be the glowing offerings of pure unsullied love. By her writings she had indeed hewed the pathways to immortality and made our journey easier, safer. By merely reciting in proper order (tappame ingu ipparisu uraiappar) the thirty verses of *Tiruppavai*, the devotees are able to draw closer to God. Vedanta Desika imagines that the Lord is proud of His bride, He respects her and hence respects the Southern direction. Will he then refuse any request made to Him by Goda Devi on our behalf?

Sri Goda Stuti - 12

*"Mother Goda Devi!
Godavari purifies the world*

*By its waters as it carries
Your name.
Ganga and other streams
Join it for long periods
"To purify themselves".*

The name of Goda Devi evokes noble ideas in the mind of Vedanta Desika. Repeating the name has a purifying effect upon our minds as it drives away evil thoughts and makes us clean and ready to receive the Lord's grace. Naturally, this reminds one of the cleansing activity of world-redemption undertaken by the seven holy rivers of India. Goda Devi's name brings to us in particular, one of the seven, the Godavari.

By itself, Godavari is one of the greatest Indian rivers that meanders through 900 miles in South India. Rising at Tryambak near Nasik, the river has several legends associated with it. One of them is about the sage Gautama who had to expiate the sin of killing a cow accidentally. He performed *tapas*. A pleased Siva brought down Ganga on the Brahmagiri Hill near Tryambak, and the waters resuscitated the dead cow, absolving Gautama from the sin of 'go-hatya'. The stream came to be known as Godavari thereafter.

The name literally means 'the best of the rivers giving cows', a clear reference to the richness of its delta which is ever-green and prosperous. Godavari joins the Bay of Bengal at Yanam and Narasapur after flowing as two streams Gautami and Vasista, from Dowleswaram. The seven sages of Indian Puranas are closely associated with several places on the pathway of Godavari. The waters of the river are said to cure leprosy and blood pressure.

Godavari has a special place in the affection of Ramayana-lovers, for it is on its banks that Rama and Sita spent some of the happiest moments in their lives. When Rama decides to move further South, Agastya directs him to Panchavati, a secluded and charming spot on the banks of Godavari. As soon as the three exiles reach the place they are captivated by it. Here nature is in her resplendent variety due to the waters of Godavari. The place

is absolutely clean. The changing seasons bring their various comforts and pleasures. Kalidasa's *Raghuvamsa* has Rama pointing out Panchavati to Sita as they fly back in the Pushpaka from Lanka to Ayodhya:

"I remember returning from hunting and resting with my head on your lap in the garden on the Godavari bank. The cool breeze from the river used to lull me into pleasant sleep at once".

Kamban in his Tamil epic describes Godavari as a decoration of Mother Earth, "a noble poem of our ancients". The divine river (kadavul aaru) appeared to be welcoming the Ayodhyan royalty with lotuses and lilies. At the same time, the gushing waters seemed to be sorrowing for the fate that had made the princely three wander as homeless ascetics. Romantic thoughts breeze through the minds of Sita and Rama as they watch the birds, animals and sand banks on the river. They decide to spend their exile here.

Vedanta Desika is reminded of all these associations that proclaim the greatness of the river. But the main reason for Godavari's greatness is, according to him, the name which associates it with Goda Devi. When we think of Goda Devi we are immediately drawn into a world of poetry and beauty, of generosity and love, of compassion and grace. Hence, the river's name reminds us of Goda Devi's manifestation and ministry, the soulful aspiration contained in the *Tirumozhi* and the life divine detailed in *Tiruppavai*. The waves of remembrance which swing us from one verse to another in the two poems are as gentle and purposeful as the waves of Godavari. The name builds bridges of ecstatic devotion and we respect and love the river more than ever.

Having been named after the Mother of Compassion, Godavari cannot be indifferent any more to human beings. Since reciting the spiritual springs of Goda Devi's poesy purifies the mind and the heart of the earth-bound, the river decides to engage itself in purifying the earth. The river carries the divine badge in its name; hence its waters automatically become nectarean.

The noble service of Godavari may be gauged by the fact that all the Holy rivers which cleanse people of their sins come to Godavari to rid themselves of the gathered dirt. Godavari is able to cleanse them because she herself is sinless. This is because she has been named after one who was herself Purity incarnate.

Finally, it is appropriate for such a great river to be named after Goda Devi who was an incarnation of Bhu Devi. Some of the epithets in the Bhu Sukta are eminently applicable to the river. Godavari is also close to the sea (samudravati), receives the rays of the sun (savitri), has beautiful limbs (angee), is famous (mahee), praised by others (mahah), sustains living things (dharanee), gives refuge to gods (surasari), spreads all over the earth (ihah vyapinee) and is found on mountains (srunga vyathistah) and in laudable activities (yajna). And of course Godavari is also a spread of water (jalsayinee) who holds aloft prosperity (sriyandhara) and flows for the sake of her helpless children (andho parisati).

What's in a name, the Westerner might ask. But our ancients knew that a name can contain continents of "self-diffusing peace".

Sri Goda Stuti - 13

*"Vision of Beauty! Your love
Is gauged by the humour
Of your friends who ask!
How did you choose as your groom
An ancient man who flies a bird
And sleeps on a snake?"*

Vedanta Desika uses ninda-stuti to bring out Narayana's attributes as well as the intense love of Goda Devi for the Lord. Goda Devi is, of course, very beautiful. She is envisioned as of such charm as even to turn the Lord away from Neela Devi; and she is herself Neela Devi whose beauty is the guardian-curtain that hides our sins from the punishing eyes of the Lord. Eternally young, the maid of Srivillipputtur has perfectly formed limbs (sutanuh), even as her poems have perfect form. The style is the

man! The style of *Tiruppavai* which is a lovely blend of the several rasas is itself a reflection of Goda Devi's beauty.

Yet, she has chosen an old man who has strange preferences! An old man (purana purushah), ageless, ancient, found in a doze all the time! Thus Vedanta Desika draws our attention to the central symbolism of Narayana Tattva.

The Lord is not confined by time. He is beyond it, and has no beginning nor end. There are several Suktas in the Vedas which refer to the Lord as the 'ancient one' (poorva). The Sahasranama refers to the Lord as the ancient (sthavirah), the first (jyeshtah), the primal cause (adi deva), the old one (puratana), and more ancient than ancient Brahma (sanatanadama). But then He is also eternally young and the Vishnu Sukta says:

*"He who surrenders to Vishnu
Who is ancient and eternally new,
the creator of worlds innumerable,
and he who sings the divine birth
Do indeed gain fame
And reach the ultimate Goal".*

Ancient (poorva) but eternally youthful (naveeyas). This 'purana purusha' alone can give us liberation and admittance into Vaikuntha. Goda Devi knows this secret. Hence, the opening verse of *Tiruppavai* assures us that the Supreme Being, Narayana who is to give the devotees Parai, the right to serve Him, is also the youthful son of Nanda (Nandagopan kumaran) and the lion-cub of Yasodha (Yesodai ilam singam).

Having spoken to us of the Purana Purusha (*vedahametam purusham mahaantam*, as the Sukta declares) Vedanta Desika also brings to our notice the snake-bed of the Lord. What a strange bed, O Goda Devi, when you had lovingly described the cot of Krishna in *Tiruppavai* as being uprised by ivory tusks and spread with the softest milk-cotton mattress (*meddhenra pancha sayanam*) which is cool in summer and warm in winter, fragrant, white, soft and spacious? Strange are the ways of love that overlooks such a frightening stage for its fulfilment!

But then this 'naga sayanam' shows us how to be a servant of the Lord. Adishesha is the foremost among the Lord's serviteurs and in a trice transforms himself into the appropriate state to serve the Lord. He is a bed, a foot-stool, a throne or an umbrella for the Lord as the need arises. Narayana in yogic sleep on the snake in the midst of the milky ocean is the principle of Ananda consciousness floating in eternity. Goda Devi has chosen well for our bridal goal is to remain merged in Ananda all the time.

There is then the mount of the Lord. The friends smile at her; fancy flying high, perched precariously on a bird! A bird that cannot be depended upon either for its eagle eyes would be scanning the earth for a serpent-feed and suddenly it may plunge down to catch its prey. This is how Vedanta Desika reminds us of the importance of Garuda. Garuda is the soul of the Vedas. Vedanta Desika had initiation in Garuda mantra and had once saved himself from a poisonous serpent by uttering the mantra. It was by reciting this incantation that he had a vision of the Sacred Eagle who initiated him into Hayagriva mantra. Vedanta Desika has written the Garuda Dandakam and the Garuda Panchasat. Both the poems contain priceless esoteric knowledge relating to the Vedas. While the Dandaka describes Garuda's personality, the Panchasat explains how each limb of the bird is actually a part of the Veda and gives an account of Garuda's life history. Garuda had striven with superhuman ferocity to get his mother Vinata released from slavery. He also comes down during the time of divine incarnations. He had released Rama and Lakshmana from the 'naga pasas' in Lanka's battle ground. During the Krishna incarnation he recovered the Lord's crown from Virochana and offered the same to Krishna who was grazing cows in Gokula. Goda Devi fondly calls Krishna 'Pullaraiyan', the Lord of the Bird. By giving importance to Garuda we give importance to the Vedas, the source of our sanatana dharma.

Association of ideas with Srirangam and Srivilliputtur no doubt led Vedanta Desika to speak about the serpent-bed and the bird-mount. While the snake Ananta is prominent in Srirangam where Goda Devi attained the Lord, Garuda has a position of great

importance in the Srivilliputtur temple. The standing Garuda, smiling with folded hands, proclaims that sincere service can lead us to the life divine. Is it not heaven for him when he resides for ever in the immediate presence of Rangamannar and Goda Devi, the union of Happiness and Beauty?

Sri Goda Stuti - 14

*"Queen Goda Devi!
The bees that had halted
On the Vijayanti garland
Have now moved up to the Lord's crown
Where your garland rests.
They look like an umbrella
Made of peacock feathers."*

The thought of a bride's friends teasing her on her choice leads Vedanta Desika to think of the ceremonies associated with a wedding. The exchange of garlands is an important ceremony in a Hindu wedding. The poet sees in his vision Goda Devi along with her Bridegroom Beautiful (Azhahiya Manavalan) as the two engage themselves in the act of exchanging garlands. Right now He has accepted the garland worn by Goda Devi. He stands resplendent in wedding finery, and decorates his crown with the circlet of Goda Devi's garland.

The Lord is wearing the Vijayanti garland, a special decoration made of choice flowers and tulasi leaves. Krishna's name is constantly associated with this garland. Vedanta Desika's epic *Yadavabhyudayam* opens with a play on the word 'vijayanti'.

*"I bow to the wanderer of Brindavan,
The beloved of Yadava girls,
Who wears the garland Vijayanti
And was born on Srijayanti."*

The Lord loves spaces where Nature reigns supreme. All the Alvars use a portion of their verses for descriptions of nature's beauty. Goda Devi herself uses nature imagery most of the time. The Lord loves nature, He enjoys walking in groves and forests, He makes friends with cows and birds, He decorates Himself with

peacock feathers and wild flowers. Vaijayanti symbolises this love as also the certain possibility of attaining Him even if we are wild, wayside flowers and just green leaves. If with sincerity we look up to Him, and surrender ourselves, He would take us close to Him as He does the flowers collected in Brindavan which one turned into the Vaijayanti. These flowers are ever fresh for they cease to age when they touch the Lord even as people cease to age when they become self-absorbed devotees of the divine. One is eternally young as people were in Krishna's presence in Gokula. A swarm of bees are always covering the blooms in the Vaijayanti to drink the dripping honey, as the flowers continue to be fresh.

Even as Vedanta Desika is looking on, there is an exodus of bees from the Vaijayanti. They now zoom up and settle down on the circlet of flowers that had till now decorated Goda Devi's tressess. Who can resist the divine scent of Goda Devi's garland? It contains that incandescent addition, the love of a pure, devoted heart. In a trice the devotee's power outstrips that of the Divine Power.

Goda Devi's madhura bhakti is overwhelmingly sweet.

*"Singing the great qualities
Of Govinda of Venkata Hill,
O grace-laden clouds;
Would I be able to survive?"*

The very intensity of emotions produces the looked-for image!

*"We saw Him at Brindavan
Playing with His friends;
The Vaijayanti gleamed
Like lightning through dark clouds!"*

In the words of P. Sri Acharya:

"The play goes on, as the Vaijayanti moves. Such is the wonderful game that is eternally enacted in the Brindavan of devotion. Goda Devi's love thirsts to become the Vaijayanti worn by the Lord. Wouldn't she herself be a lightning like it when made one with the Dark Cloud? To gain the union, she follows the

Dhanurmasa vrata. And what a unique, novel, revolutionary vrata it is!"

Now her desire is granted, and as a preliminary to the coming union, her garland has been accepted. The never-fading love of Goda Devi has given her garland an ever-fresh scent and the bees reach up to it in search of honeyed happiness. As they buzz around forming a thick circle, they appear as a slightly moving umbrella of peacock feathers (barha atapatra). The sight is captivating and the poet is reminded of the umbrella that the bridegroom carries prior to receiving *kanya daana*. He who had held up the Govardhana Hill as an umbrella is now a bridegroom carrying a different kind of umbrella!

Krishnadeva Raya also dwells fondly on Ranganatha as a bridegroom in *Amukta Malyada*. The auspicious accoutrements of a bridegroom (garland, lamp, umbrella etc.) are formed by the whole of the Lord's creation!

*"The twelve Adityas
came as brilliant lamps;
The moon was the umbrella,
The stars formed its decoration;
The lord of the sea spread red lotuses
And cleaning water on the roads;
Damoze Nature with divine maids
decorated the entire earth".*

The bees are circling as they dash one another (mitah pratigaata lolah) in their hurry to get at the garland of Goda Devi which now rests on the Lord's crown. This movement makes it appear as though the decorative hangings from the umbrella of peacock feathers are swaying gently in the breeze.

Sri Goda Stuti - 15

*"Mother Goda Devi!
The Vaijayanti is scented,
Close to the heart and pleasing,
Shaded with attractive red,
Soft and noble in many respects.*

*But it is left far behind
By your garland
That has reached the Lord's crown".*

As Vedanta Desika contemplates on the two garlands that decorate Ranganatha as a bridegroom, he notes the special characteristics of the Vaijayanti. The garland is always fresh, and has sweet scent. A mere look at it fills our heart with Ananda. It is close to the Lord's heart as a devotee accepted by Him. The auspicious red colour indicates overwhelming love. The flowers are softer than silk. Several other qualities can also be enumerated in favour of the Vaijayanti. Seen in the company of Krishna, Vaijayanti is all these and something more. As one gazes upon the Lord wearing the garland, streams of Ananda consciousness flow towards us.

But divorced from His presence, what are we? Away from Krishna, of what use are the flowers that make up the Vaijayanti? In fact, looking upon the flowers in the absence of the Lord is to sink in a sea of sorrow. In *Tirumozhi* Goda Devi finds dark-shaded flowers (kar-kodal-poo) to be an army sent to torture her with remembrances; the uprising blooms (mel-thonri-poo) scorch her like the Lord's fiery discus; and the jasmine (mullai) reminds her of the Lord's smile and makes the separation harder to bear. In fact, Goda Devi finds the sea, rains, birds and indeed, all nature meaningless and only a source of dejection and despair when Krishna is not visible. The flowers of the Vaijayanti which are beautiful, soft, red-sheened and joy-giving are of no use by themselves. All nature can be beautiful, fruitful and pleasant only when it is seen as part of the divine, as an aspect of Narayana tattva. It is Krishna who gives meaning to the life around us and our own existence.

Though the Vaijayanti with Krishna is superior to everything, it appears somewhat removed from its importance because of Goda Devi's circlet of flowers. Speaking in physical terms, the circlet is upon the crown which is higher than the neck. Even in terms of its contents it appears to have a higher position as the bees have found it more fruitful than the Vaijayanti.

In Sri Vaishnavism, the Sri tattva is given greater importance than Narayana Tattva, and hence Goda Devi's garland becomes more important than Krishna's Vijayanti as far as the devotee is concerned. The Lord guards us in two ways; by saving us, and by helping us reach our Goal. The presence of the Mother is an absolute requirement for this guardianship. Commentators point out that Kamban's Vali attributes Rama's action to the absence of Sita. Nammalvar also says:

*"O Lord who has on the breast
Lakshmi who will not leave you even for a moment;
Of unequalled fame, my Lord of the three worlds;
O Venkateswara whom the devas and rishis desire;
Having no other refuge, I have surrendered at your feet".*

The phrase 'Lakshmi who will not leave you even for a moment' (ahalahillen iraiyum) indicates that Sri is a constant presence with Narayana as brilliance is with the Sun. She is Rukmini to Krishna, Sita to Rama, Padmavati to Venkateswara.

However, though they incarnate together, there is a subtle difference in their guardianship even as there is a difference between Goda Devi's garland and the Vijayanti. Vijayanti is the Lord's guardian-symbol made of Vedas, Shastras, Agamas, Yajnas, various yugas and a million rituals. For ordinary people like us, these pathways are difficult. the esoteric meaning as well as the proper mantric intonation of the Vedas requires very hard, nay, superhuman effort on our part. It is as if we are excluded from all that by reason of our own weakness.

Then, is there an easy pathway for us? If so, what is it?

There is the garland of Goda Devi offered to the Lord which is superior even to the Vijayanti. He has Himself accepted it and encircled His tresses with it. This garland is Goda Devi's *Tiruppavai*. Observing the triple purity of body, speech and thought (tooyomay), offering gathered flowers as worship (too malar toovi tozhudu), if we sing these verses (vaayinal paadi) and meditate upon their content (manathinal chinthithu), we will certainly be

vouchsafed a vision of the Lord. For Goda Devi's words can lead us to the Lord's presence. In the words of Sri Sribhashyam Appalacharyulu:

"Andal is an exemplar of righteous conduct (sadacharanasila) and embodiment of intense devotion (Bhaktipravana). Out of the depths of her contemplation have emerged flower-like words; and holding them by the thread of her melodious voice, she has made a garland of hymns called Tiruppavai and offered it to Sri Ranganatha.....If we contemplate her, we too shall be blessed with the fortune of rendering devoted service to God with our thought, word and deeds.

(-Tr. C. Sitaramamurti)

Sri Goda Stuti - 16

*"The bees that have surrounded
Your garland on the Lord's crown
And are drinking honey in joy
Make the auspicious sounds
That are appropriate
To your swayamvara".*

Vedanta Desika continues to enjoy the vision of Goda Devi-Ranganatha in their wedding attire. They have exchanged garlands. Hark! The muhurtham is at hand. The auspicious sounds of music are heard by him in the buzz of the bees meaning the garland of Goda Devi that now gleams as a circlet on the Lord's crown. Nature itself is taking part in the divine wedding:

*"The wedding of the eternal Lord and Spouse
Took place again on earth in human forms.
In a new act of the drama of the world
The united Two began a greater age.
In the silence and murmur of that emerald world
And the mutter of the priest-wind's sacred verse,
Amid the choral whisperings of the leaves
Love's twain had joined together and grew one.
The natural miracle was wrought once more*

*In the immutable ideal world
One human moment was eternal made".*

(Sri Aurobindo. Savitri)

Goda Devi's 'Dream' recounts the auspicious sounds that accompanied her wedding:

*"Beneath the pearl decorated pandal
My cousin Madhusudana held my hand
While the drums resounded,
And the conches blew! such was my dream".*

Vedanta Desika implies that apart from the regular drums and conches, the bees on the Lord's crown too were contributing their music to increase the sense of joy and satisfaction. They are giving assent to Goda Devi's choice (swayamvara). She has done right by choosing the Divine!

To disseminate the sense of fulfilment at the wedding, sweet, scented water is distributed to those present. The honey in the garland of Goda Devi is such a welcome, pleasing drink and there is plenty of it too. So the bees drink as much as they want (svachchanda kalpita), and are delighted by the taste of drinking in company (sapeetirasa pramodah). The whole atmosphere is charged with sweetness.

The bees also symbolise the devotees who have chosen to approach the Lord through Goda Devi's garland of songs (paamaalai). *Tiruppavai* has been accepted by the Lord with pleasure. We join Uyyakondar's prayer:

"O slender creeper of gold! You have offered the flower-garland worn by you to Sri Ranganatha. O wearer of divine bracelets! You have elevated us by rendering into song the divine rite (vrata) observed by the gopis in the past. You have prayed to Cupid, the Lord of love (Manmatha), seeking his favour to secure for you the place of the beloved of Venkatachalapati. Pray, grant us, your servants, the strength not to violate that prayer".

Tr. C. Sitaramamurti

Ramanuja himself has said that these thirty verses of *Tiruppavai* contain the seed of all the Vedas. They destroy our difficulties and show us the Lord's feet. In fact, it is in vain that the earth carries people who do not know the *Tiruppavai* verses (*vaiyam sumappaduvum vambu*).

Tiruppavai gives all-delight to the devotees who recite it and meditate upon its esoteric significance. The verses are sweet as literature and sublime as scripture. Here the best of poesy weds the finest spiritual thoughts. It is life around us that also indicates the life beyond. The verses are charmed magic casements that open out on faery seas of spiritual fulfilment.

The *Tiruppavai* world is immense. There are the wonderful commentaries of Peria Achan Pillai and other exegeticists that spread a grand feast of bhakti yoga. These commentaries, in their turn, strike our mind with new waves of significance taking us back to Goda Devi's poetry. There is God's plenty all the time. We can allow ourselves to drink as much of this poetic honey as we want. There will never be a dearth of new ideas and devotional ecstasy in *Tiruppavai* even as the honey in the circlet on Ranganatha's crown is never exhausted. That garland is ever-fresh and honey-dripping. The honey-springs in *Tiruppavai* are also ever-active.

The singers of *Tiruppavai* are in a state of great joy like the swarm of bees (*pramodah*). This is because Sri Vaishnavism knows the secret of sat-sangha. *Tiruppavai* is meant to be sung in groups (*sanga-t-tamil*). The 27th verse makes this clear. May we enjoy the sweet milk-and-rice together (*koodiyirundu kulirndelorempavai*)! The gopikas perform the vrata as a group. The culmination is marked by a group-feast, and there is as much of group-singing of the Lord's praises as actual eating. This phase in *Tiruppavai* is observed even today as 'kudaai' to celebrate the coming together of Krishna and the gopikas to enjoy together the sweet pudding of Ananda consciousness. Sri Srihashyam Appalacharyulu says:

"They are not interested so much in eating as in sitting together to eat. The devotees are mainly interested in coming into contact with other devotees and saints and not in mere eating. The strain undergone over such a long period in coming to Krishna and the anguish of separation from him will disappear with his mere touch and with contact of other kindred spirits. Thus relieved, with minds cool and collected they sit comfortably to eat the sweet pudding with Krishna. They have completed their ritual. They have reached the stage of enjoyment of fulfilled desire; and in this condition what they aspire for is consecrated service to God."

(Tr. C. Sitaramamurti)

Sri Goda Stuti - 17

*"The navel of your Lord
Is scented by the lotus
Whose pollen can create universes;
His breast has received
The sandalwood of Lakshmi's bosom;
His feet have grown aromatic
By the Vedic scriptures;
Yet he lovingly takes your garland
To decorate His crown."*

The divine personality of Narayana has been proclaimed in countless ways. As the originator of this world, He has spread a wide wonder. How has it been possible for the Lord to create such countless varieties in the universe?

*"Through the play of consciousness in matter
You have designed this wonderful universe:
These myriad multi-coloured worlds
You have structured in terms of beauty.
Many a joy have you devised, O Lord!"*

(Subramania Bharati)

There are countless number of worlds: universes innumerable are contained in the Lord's cosmic figure. Each of these universes has grown out of a pollen particle at the centre of the lotus

that rises from Vishnu's navel. Symbolically Brahma sits in the lotus and engages himself in the act of creation. This image projects in fairly sufficient terms the cosmic form (viswarupa) of the Lord.

The Lord is known as 'sarvagandhah'. He is the source of all scents; He is also the source of the five elements as it is from Him that the universes take their form. As if this were not enough, He is constantly retaining on his breast Lakshmi who is 'gandhadhvara', a maid who has been created out of the scent of fresh-blown lotuses. Lakshmi is 'ardhra', wet by the nectar dripping from the fresh lotus. She is also 'pushkarini', one who has lotuses in her hands, at her feet and on her head, and who wears lotus garlands. She has applied divine sandal paste on her bosom. Thus she is a bouquet of sweet scents and her continued presence so close to the Lord creates a soul-bewitching atmosphere. Goda Devi also refers to Krishna's resting his garlanded breast on the bosom of Nappinnai whose tresses are decorated with fresh, scented blossoms (kothalar-poonkuzhal). Between the cosmic lotus rising from the navel and the sandal-paste scent presented by the lotus goddess (Kamala), Narayana is well-stocked with the happiness that comes from them.

Then, there is another kind of scent which is presented to the Lord. This is the scent of prayer and praise wafted from the Vedas and other scriptures. At the Lord's feet are offered scented flowers innumerable. The Purusha and Narayana suktas take the lead:

*"Narayana is thousand-headed, bright,
Cosmic-eyed, world-redeemer;
He is the world, stainless,
the Supreme, the Lord".*

The Tamil Vedas of the Alvars have described the Lord through honeyed verses. Reciting them induces the pleasant feeling (sukha-anubhava) associated with lovely scents. Thus Nammalvar:

*"Is your crown formed by your face bright?
Has the brilliance of your feet*

*become the lotus seat?
Have your gleaming ornaments
and gold-sheened robe
Streamed out of your bodily glow?
O Narayana, explain this".*

Such honeyed praise has given the Lord's feet a divine scent. He is not in need of anything more by way of scent. Indeed, can there be a finer aroma than that presented by the divine lotus, the sandal-pasted bosom of Lakshmi and the praises showered by the scriptures?

Evidently there is, for as Vedanta Desika looks on, Ranganatha accepts eagerly the string of flowers that had till now decorated Goda Devi's tresses. He who is a Viswarupa, Krishna the ever-victorious at whose feet emperors and gods prostrate themselves, now bows his head while he takes the garland from Goda Devi. Recognising in it a scent which has not been found so far in His rich treasury, the Lord weaves it around his crown. It is this circlet on the top that now catches our eyes by its colour and scent.

This is Vedanta Desika's way of telling us of the Lord's special love for Goda Devi's prayers. His cosmic power symbolised by the lotus on the navel, His eternal companion Lakshmi, and the proclamation of the scriptures regarding His *paratva* are all familiar to us. But it is Goda Devi who can take us close to Him for her garland alone brings out the *saulabhya* of the Lord. What is the use of the Lord's *Paratva*, if there is no easy method of attaining Him? And we need an easy way, as we are weak-bodied, weak-minced and weak-spirited. The Lord accepts Goda Devi's garland (*poomaalai*) and string of verses (*paamaalai*) with the easy gesture of overflowing love that lies in bending the head a little (*natena sirasa*). This little phrase of Desika assures us that the Lord is attainable for the sincere devotee, and sincere devotion is considered by Him as of greater value than all the reverberations that proceed from the scriptures.

Sri Goda Stuti - 18

*"Mother Goda Devi!
By accepting your scarf
And the garland scented
By your tresses,
Rangapathi has won the sure right
Of being crowned
The Lord of auspicious life."*

Sri Ranganatha is usually referred to as the treasure-house of auspicious things (Mangala nidhi). The temple at Srirangam is famous for its colourful ceremonies all of which are associated with splendour as well as auspicious ideas. Known as Bhuloka Vaikuntham, the 'peria' (big) is used for several aspects connected with the temple: Peria Kovil (Temple), Peria Perumal (God), Peria Piratti (Mother), Per Arangam (Srirangam), Peria Avasaram (Cooked Offering), Peria Melam (Drum) and Peria Tiruppaniyaram (Temple sweets). Of the 108 special temples to Vishnu, Srirangam is the most important. It is only of Ranganatha that all the Alvars have sung hymns. Most of the Acharyas performed their service to Sri Vaishnava Darsana from this place. Kambar's *Ramayana* was released in this temple.

Ranganatha also has 'nitya utsava' and the festivals are celebrated in a grand manner. Among the more important ones, mention may be made of the Viruppanan festival in April-May, Spring Festival in May-June, Jyeshthabishekam in June-July, Pavitrotsavam in August-September, Navaratri in September-October, Swing Festival in October-November, Parvotsavam in November-December, Adhyayanotsavam in December-January, Bhupati Festival in January-February, Boat Festival in February-March and Brahmotsavam in March-April. Everyday something roseate, and all the days the golden sounds of *Divya Prabhandham* recitation. It is all perhaps not to be wondered at, for Ranganatha is the King of the Universe. As Yamunacharya writes in *Stotra-ratna*:

"Who else (but you) is in the form of the Goddess of Fortune (affluence, wealth and prosperity), Sri, Mahalakshmi her-

self? Who (but you) is the repository of the quality known as absolute sattva? Who (except you) is the lotus eyed? Who (but you) is the most eminent of all purushas (persons)? In just an infinitesimal fraction of whose myriads of phases does this wonderful universe, with its diversity of the sentient and the non-sentient objects, rest?"

(Tr. S. Satyamurti Ayyangar)

Ranganatha is "the nectarean ocean of all auspicious qualities" (samastha kalyana gunamrutodadhih). He is now accepting Goda Devi's scarf to wear it as a head-dress, as if He did not already have a precious, bejewelled crown. And happily does He take her garland and decorate His crown with it.

The scarf and the garland of Goda Devi are the royal insignia that enhance Ranganatha's right to be the Emperor of Cosmos. As the Lord takes the scarf lovingly, Goda Devi must have been reminded of His pranks in the kingdom of Love about which she had sung with great feeling:

*"We had come for our bath
At dawn, even before the cock's crow.
Lover of the snake-bed!
Look, the sun is up.
We have learnt our lesson
And shall never come to this lake.
My friend and me pray to you.
Give back our robes."*

Is there a smile on His face too, as He deliberately winds the scarf as a 'parivattam', a shining aura to surround the Divine face? And a deep sigh of enjoyment as he puts on his crown the garland that has received the scintillating scent of Goda Devi's tresses? Though Ranganatha is the owner of priceless auspicious signs (sowbhagya sampath), it is Goda Devi's offering that crowns Him effectively. Now He becomes aware of the innocent souls thanks to Goda Devi. With her *Tiruppavai* she has woken up (udbhodhya) the Lord and made Him aware of His Lordship over the cosmos. This she has done by offering all that she has at his altar. To quote Sri Sribhashyam Appalacharyulu:

"She has reminded Him of the Upanishadic secret that the individual self (Jivatma) is entirely dependent upon the Supreme Self (Paramatma). In other words, her message lies in making known to all that He is the Indweller of the heart of the Universe and that the entire world is His and that He is the Lord Absolute. This great secret of the nature of the self is hidden in the caves of the Upanishads, in the same way as the Supreme Self lies asleep in the valley of the mountains. To grasp this secret and make it known to Him is to give up the freedom (swatantrayam) ascribed to her and to accept her natural position of entire dependence on Him".

(Tr. C. Sitaramamurti)

The job is complete when she hands over her scarf and garland to the Lord at their wedding. These two symbolise Goda Devi's writings which announce the dependence of the individual self on the Supreme Self. Not knowledge, nor tapas nor yet yajna of any kind that can clinch our relationship to the Lord; but the sterling sincerity of the cowherdesses is a sure passport to His kingdom:

"Govinda, untouched by the least blemish!

Our relations do not terminate here.

Ignorant folks we, in our love

We called you by familiar names.

No offence please! Grant us boons."

(Tiruppavai, Tr. R. Bangaruswami)

By bending down to guard the helpless and innocent, Ranganatha truly gets the enhanced right (mahaadhikaram) to be the Emperor of Universal Prosperity.

Sri Goda Stuti - 19

"The highest sections of the Vedas

Praise the Lord lovingly

As the source of all scents:

He gains a special joy

In receiving the garlands

That have been scented

By your curly tresses".

As Vedanta Desika becomes part of the vision he is witnessing, he inhales the scent spread by the garlands of Goda Devi. How superior they must be to stand on their own in the presence of the Lord who is described as the source of all scents (*sarva gandhah*) by the topmost branches of the Vedas! As the thought strikes him, the poet is able to project before us the Supreme Lordship of Narayana as proclaimed by the Upanishads which rise like superb mountains in the sublime fields of the Vedas.

The Upanishads repeatedly assure us that there is a Supreme Being, and that Supreme is the source of the scents, the five elements which make up creation. We recognise the Lord's existence through these elements. The Mundaka Upanishad, for instance, speaks of the lower (*apara*) and the higher (*para*) knowledge. Para Vidya is to apprehend the Imperishable Supreme:

*"That which is invisible, ungraspable,
without family, without caste--
Without sight or hearing is It,
without hand or foot,
Eternal, all-pervading, omnipresent, exceedingly subtle;
That is the Imperishable, which the wise
perceive as the source of beings.
As a spider emits and draws in its thread,
As herbs arise on the earth,
As the hairs of the head and body
from a living person,
So from the Imperishable arises
everything here".*

(Tr. R.E.Hume)

Further on we are told about the Heavenly Purusha who is the supporter of all. The Purusha Sukta is a piece of sublime revelation, while the suktas on Narayana describe Him as the Home-of-all, Womb-of-all. The Vedic-Upanishadic realisation is reiterated by the Alvars. Thus Tirumazhisai:

*"Vishnu among all the gods,
The first incarnation among the triune gods,
The form of all the rest in creation*

*Is Narayana: they who do not know this
Have studied in vain".* (Nanmuhān Tiruvantati.54)

The Lord is everything: whatever is seen or felt or imagined is Narayana (niradellam Nedumal). This is the gist of true understanding. Can there be anything beyond this total view, and carry on its individuality so as to stand equal before the Lord's glory and grandeur?

Apparently Goda Devi's offering can do this and the Lord gladly welcomes an equal into His fold. A sweet scent equal to His, yet different is wafted from Goda Devi's garland. He recognises an Empress in her who is equal but a little different. If the Lord is the source of all creation, she is the source of loving servitude. How can there be a Lord without a serviteur, this empress of Love seems to ask, as she wakes Him up and binds Him with her garland.

Accepting the garland He is moved by a strange happiness (anyam amodam adigachchati). This special scent comes from Goda Devi's curly (kutila) tresses which enhance the resident charm, and they also signify a certain mischievous nature, a somewhat self-willed personality. That would be an appropriate summing-up of Goda Devi's poetry which runs through the gamut of several emotions. This gives a keener edge to the Lord's pleasure. Anger, pathos, satire, distrust, sorrow and ecstasy are woven into the verses. While the anxiety of waiting and the suicidal despair of hopelessness mark much of *Tirumozhi*, *Tiruppavai* is all aspiration, humour, prayer and indestructible faith. The flowers of hope may be noticed when Goda Devi asserts: 'Narayana *himself* will give us Parai"; "The Maya, jem-sheened Lord, has promised yesterday":

*"If we but approach you with purity,
Worship you with flowers pure
Sing your praises with deep emotion
And meditate upon you in our minds,
Our past errors and those to creep in in future
will be burnt like cotton in the fire".*

(Tr. R. Bangaruswami)

The curly style of wit and humour:

*"Wake her up, mother! Is she dumb?
Or deaf? Or dull?
Or under an interdict? Or in a trance?
Why else has she not heard us crying
Mamaya, Vaikuntha, Madhava?"
"Did' Kumbhakarna bequeath his sleep to you?"
"Thou shameless, prattling girl,
Who promised to wake us up earlier!"*

And the prayer of faith:

*"Thou flower-like,
Rise from your bed, march into the Hall,
And taking your lion-throne
Enquire into our grievance
And dispense mercy".*

Sri Goda Stuti - 20

*"The Father of the worlds
Has placed on His crown
The garland from your tresses.
Now your side-glances
Decorate Him again
With strings of blue lotuses."*

Vedanta Desika follows each blissful moment in the wedding of Goda Devi and Ranganatha. The bridegroom has taken the bride's garland and placed it on His crown. The Father of the world right now appears as a Bhuvana Sundara, the most beautiful person in all creation. The bride feels this, and would like to gaze and gaze upon her husband. Had she not dreamt of this so often? The dream had proceeded to be a reality and she realises that Krishna who filled her heart has come now to claim her.

*"Ranga had once swallowed
The seven worlds
As a babe on a banyan leaf;
My heart has been filled*

*By the lovely blue figure
 With pearl and gem garlands!
 The Dark Cloud who ate butter
 As a cowherd, stole my heart;
 He is the Lord of the Universe, Ranga.
 Having seen Him, my nectar,
 My eyes can see nought else".* (Tiruppan Alvar)

But from whence this shyness, this inability to raise her eyes to the Lord's face? Like any other bride in the world, Goda Devi too steals a glance at the groom through the corner of her eye. Vedanta Desika mentions this to underline the natural advantage Goda Devi had in following madhura bhakti to attain the Lord. The gesture is utterly natural, romantic, moving. It is so with a real devotee too. The experienced vision can never be taken in at a straight movement. The experience is quite unnerving, and the devotee makes his approach gradually, lovingly and with total faith.

Ranganatha, of course, is no ordinary bridegroom. Vedanta Desika hastens to point this out, lest his suggestion of romance bring down the elevated atmosphere of the poem. The bridegroom is the Father of all the worlds (samastha jagatham pithuh). He bears lightly the triple responsibility of creation, guardianship and destruction of the worlds. He bears without hitting back the people who indulge themselves in evil due to ignorance. He bears the battle-scars which are inevitable when He incarnates to guard the righteous. He bears the kick of a Hiranya and the curses of a Gandhari for the sake of guarding His devotees. He bears the pushing by Arjuna's feet while driving the chariot amid the blood-slush of Kurukshetra. He does all this as His one aim is to guard the world and save His devotees. His is no easy task, and perhaps it is a thankless task. But having begun the leela of creation, He will not give it up. He would rather help man to achieve the life divine.

What keeps the Lord at this self-imposed task is the devotee. If there is something that neutralises the heavy burden on his

shoulders, it is the garland of love from the devotee. Just as a parent proceeds to struggle with life for the sake of bringing up his loving child as a useful and possibly great man, Narayana keeps on at His work, sustained by the faith and devotion of the prapanna. To ease His worry and responsibility as the Father of all the worlds, the Lord wears rows and rows of Goda Devi's garlands (maalya bhara sambhara). It is also an act of love and acceptance which is recognised as such by her and she would like to see His face encircled by strings of fresh blooms. Being shy, she directs at his side glances that send the message of infinite regard and loving gratitude she has for Ranganatha.

Vedanta Desika imagines that these side-glances from her dark eyes are so continuous that they appear like a garland of blue lotuses. The Blue Lord loves blue lotuses and Goda Devi is offering yet another garland which is dear to Him! This image brings to our mind the blessed vision Narayana Bhattatiri had of Krishna in Guruvayur which he rendered into the superb last dasaka of *Narayaneeyam*.

"Before me I see a bluish Radiance excelling the charm of a thick array of Kalaya flowers. At its sight I feel the upsurge of Bliss like one bathed in nectar (both without and within). Next I see in that core of that Brilliance the form of a Divine Boy charming by the graces of budding youth. He is encircled by sages like Narada athrill with ecstatic bliss, and by a bevy of beauties who are none but the Upanishads embodied".

(Tr. Swami Tapasyananda)

Sri Goda Stuti - 21

*"O incarnate Mother Earth!
Lovingly Ranga and yourself
Exchange garlands,
Enjoying this, several people
Discuss the comparative merits
Of you two. Their arguments
Are echoed by the three worlds."*

Even as Goda Devi stands shyly, the ceremonies proceed and the bride and the bridegroom are helped to exchange garlands in succession. This is a heart-warming sight. There is the Lord of Srirangam, the rich groom with rare ornaments, beautiful garlands, silken robes; a figure of surpassing beauty.

*"The devotees cannot forget
The Lord who sleeps on the snake
In Srirangam; His Lakshmi-dwelling breast,
Emerald hue, broad shoulders,
Crystalline lotus-eyes, coral lips,
Wavy tresses and brilliance are wonderful".*

(Tondaradippodi Alvar)

Facing Him is Goda Devi, the flaming creeper Amukta Malyada. Krishnadeva Raya's enraptured description of her personality (childhood, girlhood and youth) is among the finest sublime evocations in Telugu literature. As Vishnuchitta discovered the baby in the Tulasi bush, he is struck by her gentle figure (saukumarya) and brightness of body (tanuruchi). She is a mass of auspicious signs (sulakshana vitanamu), brilliant (tejamu) and lovely (chelvu). Goda Devi grows up into an unsurpassed beauty whose devotional heart adds a divine loveliness to her figure. Krishnadeva Raya says that her figure was golden, her lips were red and her face was fair. Vishnuchitta could have named her appropriately. Perhaps as Hemangi, Bimbhoshti or Chandramukhi, adds the renowned commentator Vavilla Ramaswami Sastrulu.

But Vishnuchitta named her Goda Devi after her dark tresses. These tresses are full of curls which appear to have sprung as ever so many chakras to defeat the Lord who carries a single discus!

As the eternal Lord and His Spouse stand together to exchange garlands, Vedanta Desika points out that this is the result of their love through the ages. Their oneness in the Beyond is reflected as the bride and the bridegroom for the easier understanding of the devotee. In each incarnation they show us the secret of their oneness (pranayanubhandha) by coming together as

if they were ever separate. This act of 'coming together' is an eternal drama clinched by their exchanging garlands (*anyonya malya pravritti*), as Sita and Rama, Rukmini and Krishna, Padmavati and Venkateswara, Goda Devi and Ranganatha.

In a wedding, the guests feel satiated with good food and sweet drink. They are happy to see the love and joy of the newly-weds. In that hour of being united in relationship through the girl and the boy, those present begin to expatiate on the comparative superiority of their 'side' in fun and frolic. Folk ballads are flung at each other: "Our girl is of a brighter hue"; "Our boy's eyes are prettier". Devotees of Goda Devi and Ranganatha also indulge in this raillery. As they get into deeper discussion and argument, Vedanta Desika hears through them the theological subtleties of Sri Vaishnavism propounded down the ages.

Who has greater power? The Lord or the Mother? Who is kinder? Can the Lord alone save us? Is it enough if we surrender to the Mother? Those who speak of the supremacy of the Lord point out the charama sloka: "Abandoning all other dharmas, surrender to me alone. I shall save you. Do not fear". Vibhishana and Sugriva had surrendered to the Lord alone and had been saved. The Lord is a mass of significances and carries all that is needed for saving the devotees. As Vedanta Desika describes in a Tamil verse, the Kausthubha is jiva, the Srivatsa is the Mulaprakriti, Kowmodaki is the tattva 'Mahan', Nandaka is wisdom, the sheath is ignorance, Sarnga is tamasic ahankara, Panchajanya is sattwic ahankara, Sudarsana is mind, the arrows are the Jnana and Karma indriyas while the Vijayanti is a string of the five elements and the five subtle essences. This *virat purusha* is ever intent in doing good to the devotees and is prepared to give up His Lakshmi and eternal serviteurs like Lakshmana. And does not Perialvar make the Lord say even when the Mother points out that a human being has done wrong; "my devotee would not have done it; if he has done so, it must be right."

Pat comes the reply from the other group. Without Mother the Lord is not manifest. Without Lakshmi, the Lord does not

even know how to act! The dvaya mantra makes this clear by giving the pride of place to Sri. The letter 'Sri' shows how important her many-sided activities to save mankind are. She is 'sreeyate', to whom others go; 'srayate', she goes to the Lord to speak on our behalf; 'srunoti', listens to our prayers; 'sravayati', forces the Lord to listen to us; 'srunaati', removes our difficulties; and 'sreenati', makes us deserving vessels to receive the Lord's Grace. All that is best, all that is kindness and compassion and saviour Grace comes from the Lord only by the presence of the Mother. He knows this and hence will not allow her to be away even for a moment. He would cross the seas in search of her, He would go as a glorious thief and take her away as she prays in the temple of Girija. He would descend upon an inaccessible hill to claim her as a bride. If Narayana is the best among gods and superior to all of them, it is because He tempers justice with Mercy. And mercy comes from the Mother.

Thus the relations speak of the two. But even they express their satisfaction that the couple is well-matched. As Kamban speaks of Rama and Sita:

*"As they came to the wedding seat,
The noble, victorious hero
And the loving maid swan-like
Appeared like bhoga and yoga".*

(Balakandam, Kadi Mana Padalam)

These arguments and opinions of the lesser, greater and identical qualities (nyoona adhikātva samata vishaihih) are echoed by the three worlds, as Vedanta Desika takes us in person to the wedding of Goda Devi and Ranganatha.

Sri Goda Stuti - 22

*"Mother Goda Devi!
Your hue that is green
Like the leaf of dhurva grass
And Lakshmi's complexion
Which is golden as gorochara
Have combined to give the Lord
The shade of a peacock's neck."*

Colours present simple images to convey the vision of the Supreme. The Vedic rishis knew this as also the Sangham poets. Nammalvar uses a combination of colours to limn the cosmic Lord:

*"Bearing the yellow garment
Bejewelled from the crown downwards,
Flame-lipped and red-eyed,
Your green glorious body
Reclines on a snake
That's poisonous and fierce.
You then appear to me
As the emerald mountain grand
That's adorned with red clouds,
The russet sun and the pleasant moon,
Lying on the sea-king's palm."* (Tiruvasiriyam)

One of the high water-marks of Pothana's Bhagavatam is the verse where Krishna is simply referred to as to the dark boy (nullanivaadu). In colour symbolism the dark blue is the colour of Krishna's manifestation indicating Ananda consciousness. When He is referred to as Krishna in the Sahasranama, we see not only the dark cloud but also the figure of Sachchidananda, as explained by Sankara. Tondaradippodi Alvar meltingly sings of Ranganatha. He is of the colour of the monsoon clouds (kaar oli). He is an emerald mountain (pechchai maamalai). His hue rivals the ocean (kadal niram).

This dark blue figure of the Lord is now joined by the green hue of Goda Devi. She shines like the leaf of a grass (doorva dala pratima) because she is incarnate Mother Earth who is 'sasya syamala'. Describing green as symbolic of work and action, Sri Aurobindo says:

"Green light can signify various things according to the context—in the emotional vital it is the colour of a certain form of emotional generosity, in the vital proper an activity with vital abundance or vital generosity behind it – in the vital physical it signifies a force of health".

The emotional generosity of Bhu Devi was given immortal expression when Sita told Hanuman:

"Be they evil men or good or deserving capital punishment, the noble ones should show them compassion. There is no one who has not committed a wrong action".

Na kascid naaparaadhyati! Bhu Devi is also the cause of vital abundance and health which have given her names such as Vasundhara, Vasudha, Vasavi. The *Bhu Sukta* calls her the dwelling place (sadana), the golden womb (hiranyagarbini), the mother of precious gifts (prasni) and the possessor of the rare wealth *vasu*. She is also the oceans (jalasayini) and possessor of prosperity (Sriyandhara).

The dark blue of Ranganatha and the shining green of Godadevi are joined by the golden colour of Lakshmi. The golden light is the light of divine Truth. Hence Sri is desired by the mind (manasah kamam), as she is the meaning of words (vachah akoothi) and the truth of being in things animate and inanimate (satyam). Her presence is life-giving medicine for our voice as indicated by the word 'gorochana'.

The combination of blue and green and gold—Ananda consciousness, generosity of understanding and Truth—brings before Vedanta Desika the colour of a peacock's throat (sikhavala kanta sobha). However, even in his self-forgetful mood, the poet keeps his balance. While speaking of the Lord flanked by the two wonderful goddesses and while evoking the image of a peacock which symbolises utmost enjoyment, Desika uses the sobriquet, Madhuvairi. Nature appears as honey (madhu) for the enjoyer. The world is charged with sweetness and one could have one's fill of bhoga from the attainable things in this world. But we have also to remember that Nature also gives birth to perversion when we forget the truth of things. Then nature appears as the Rakshasa, Madhu whom Vishnu destroys when the demon rushes forward to destroy creation itself (Brahma). Madhuvairi keeps us away from perversions and gives us sreyas when he appears in the company of his consorts. He is the mangala murti, mangala nidhi who grants us what is good for us (pranamataam mangalyadam). This heavenly image is spoken of by Parasara Bhatta also in the Rangaraja Stava:

"I surrender to Lakshmi who swims as a royal swan in the divine pond of Sri Ranganatha and Bhu Devi who is like her increasing shadow". It is divine Truth, dharma, that gives an increase of material and spiritual wealth and united with the Ananda of the Lord, we shall not lack anything, here or beyond.

Sri Goda Stuti - 23

"Mother!

In the past emperors like Manu

Worshipped with Vedic flowers

The Lord in the company

Of Lakshmi and yourself,

Thus did they enjoy power

For a long, long time".

As the image of Ranganatha with Goda Devi and Lakshmi glows brilliant in Vedanta Desika's vision, he remembers the good that has accrued to human beings by worshipping this image. The sahridaya in Desika immediately brings to the fore the *Raghuvamsam* of Kalidasa and how Ranganatha was the family deity of the Ikshvaku clan, "Vaivasavata Manu, the son of Surya, held in reverence by the learned, was the first king of the solar race as Pranava is for Vedas." Manu, Dileepa, Raghu, Aja, Dasaratha and Rama himself worshipped the Lord with the flowers of Vedic commandments (niyamaih nigama prasunaih) thereby gaining the power to retain kingship over long periods.

The Ranga Vimana which was with these kings was a faithful replica of Vaikunta itself. This Vimana in the shape of *pranava* contains Ranganatha who is the significance of the *pranava*. The Vimana had come out of the milky ocean in answer to Brahma's tapas. After worshipping the Lord, Brahma handed it over to Surya. Surya gave it to his son Manu from whom it came into the hands of his descendent, Ikshavaku. After several ages in Ayodhya on the banks of Sarayu, the Vimana was presented to Vibhishana during the coronation of Rama. However, on the way to Lanka, Ranganatha was pleased to stay in Srirangam on the banks of Kaveri. Then as well as now, Ranganatha gives 'vijayasri' to he-

roes and hence countless kings have worshipped Him. Within historical time come the Cholas, Cheras, the rulers of Vijayanagar and the Naiks of Thanjavur. Krishnadeva Raya's gratitude took the form of the epic *Amukta Malyada*, a mahakavya prasuna. That people who wish to rule over earth pray to Ranganatha, Sri Devi and Bhu Devi is not suprising for this rare combination gives them all that is on earth and in heaven wrapping the gifts in Ananda. Keeping this in mind Tyagaraja sings in Todi raga:

"Come, let us enjoy the sight. Sri Rangaraja, bedecked with shining and precious ornaments and attended by princes on horse-back (tejinekki samastha raju ludigamu seya) has come out in procession in Chitraveethi of Rangapuri, made holy by the Kaveri, and made fit as the abode of Lakshmi. Devas enjoy the seva and worship with devotion and Tyagaraja sings in the procession".

(Tr.C. Ramanujachari)

The flowers used by these kings are the Vedic commandments. Truly, the real flowers that the Lord expects from aspirants are the rules of good, humanitarian conduct enumerated in the scriptures. Purity of heart (satva-samsuddhi), charity (daana), self-control (dama), austerity (tapa), uprightness (arjava), non-injury (ahimsa), truth (satya), renunciation (tyaaga), compassion (daya), modesty (hri), forgiveness (kshama), fortitude (dhruti) and purity (sowcham) are some of these flowers. We know through legend and history that those who worshipped the Lord with these flowers, observing these divine qualities in their conduct, attained glory as kings. In the course of four verses in *Raghuvamsa*, Kalidasa summarises all the best in *deivee sampath* that was observed by the kings of the Solar race (Sarga I, Verses 5-8). We also know what happened when kings gave up this worship. There is the example of Agnivarna.

However, it is understood that the worship by aspirants is not merely for temporal gains. As we pray to the Lord in the company of Lakshmi and Goda Devi, the mother-love in them makes them speak highly of the devotee to the Lord and unloosen the springs of compassion in Him so that He would grant spiritual

gains also. For a Sri Vaishnava, the coveted spiritual gain is the gift of *kainkarya*. The *Mumukshupadi* of Pillai Lokacharya makes it clear that the best thing to happen for the aspirant is to serve the Lord and the Mother when they are together. That is the greatest happiness one can have. Lakshmana enjoyed this happiness and also went through the deepest soul-gloom when he had to serve Rama during the years of separation from Sita.

Service to the Lord blooms like a thousand-petalled lotus only when it is offered to Him and Lakshmi. That is also the sweetest experience for the Divya Dampati when they watch together their child in action, engaging himself in good works and receiving the bliss of life. And as desired by him, the child is made either a Rajaraja (king of kings) or Yatiraja (king of ascetics). Whether a Rajaraja or Yatiraja, the prapanna continues with his *kainkarya* and gains supernal bliss.

Sri Goda Stuti - 24

*"Mother! When Lakshmi speaks
On behalf of aspirants
Who continue to do evil,
Rangaraja might turn His face away
Unless You were sitting
On His other side".*

Speaking of the shower of auspicious gifts, temporal and spiritual, from the Lord when he is flanked by Lakshmi and Goda Devi, a thought strikes Vedanta Desika. He knows very well that there is plenty of sincerity in the aspirants. But they have an instinctive turn for indulging in wicked deeds. So strong is the pull to commit wrong that they hardly give a rest to their activities. Unfortunately this is the common experience of mortals caught in the morass of *samsara*.

But Lakshmi is all compassion. In her eagerness to save the aspirants she intercedes on their behalf and requests the Lord to save them. Ere long the aspirants are back in square number one. For the way to heaven is steep and thorny while hell beckons with its "primrose path of dalliance". And often it so happens that

the hands of the wrong-doers are still wet with the crime (ardhra aparadhini) when Lakshmi proceeds to speak on their behalf to the Lord. For she is a Mother. The matri-hridayam is the priceless gift to human beings to save them inspite of themselves.

*"I have been pity, leaning over pain
And the tender smile that heals the wounded heart
And sympathy making life less hard to bear...
Within me a blind faith and mercy dwell;
I carry the fire that never can be quenched
And the compassion that supports the suns.
I am the hope that looks towards my God".*

(Sri Aurobindo, Savitri)

The Lord, however, is also a judge. And there ought to be a limit somewhere! Once in a way he decides enough is enough. He turns his face away from Lakshmi and thus away from the supplicant. If the Lord turns away, where then is hope for man except the endless struggle in infernal fires?

Fortunately, parallel to the golden light of Lakshmi is the emerald brilliance of Goda Devi on the other side of Ranganatha. If Lakshmi is Karuna, Goda Devi is Kshama. She is like a shadow of Lakshmi, and takes up the cause of the aspirant. Incarnate Mother Earth, Goda Devi is all forgiveness. She makes herself one of the aspirants and then prays to Ranganatha on behalf of all of them. Her words are sweetly formed to remove the irritations on the Lord's brow. As she records in her *Tirumozhi*, "We are immature children, yet to grow up" and "we have no understanding of high philosophy". In *Tiruppavai* she prays:

*"Move thine eyes little by little
Like the mouth of a tiny bell,
The petals of a lotus.
If your pretty eyes look at us,
It will be like the falling of the rays
Of the Sun and the Moon together.
Our woe will then disappear."* (Tr. R. Ranganaswami)

The Lord gives in to such prayers. He finds it impossible to say 'no' to Goda Devi. As a result, knowing that it is of no use

turning His face away from Lakshmi as whether it is karuna or kshama, He will have to be lenient. He saves Himself the trouble of turning His face away (vadanam parivarthitam) and resigns Himself to the entreaties of the Golden Goddess. Such is the ministry of Goda Devi and her poetry. Therefore we surrender unto her.

"O Mother!

You are earth by spreading,

Heaven by your nobility,

World of stars by your greatness!

O All-in-all! I place my soul

Near you to make it enjoy

Closeness with the Supreme".

(Bhu Sukta)

Even as the mother feeds her child with digestible food by placing him on her hip, Goda Devi retains the aspirant near her by means of the *Tiruppavai* which easily enters the arc of his comprehension. This constant closeness to Godadevi confers upon us the privilege of being near Ranganatha. Between Lakshmi and Goda Devi, what can he do but save the *Prapanna*? Assured of such protection, assured of this Grace, why should we go in search of other places of refuge? Even the heavens ruled over by Indra shan't tempt us. We are with Tondaradippodi Alvar who sings:

"Achuta! Your figure is like

A grand green mountain.

You have coral lips; eyes like red lotus.

You are the Lord of Immortals.

You are also the babe of the cowherd clan.

Having gained this wonderful phenomenon,

Even if I were given a chance

To rule the heavens above,

I would not accept it.

It is even so, Lord of Srirangam!"

Sri Goda Stuti - 25

"Mother Goda Devi!

When you knit your brows

*The action forgives offenders,
Increases the Lord's enjoyment
And becomes the cause
Of His loss of freedom
Which had thought of matching punishment
To the evil deeds done."*

Vedanta Desika realises that Goda Devi is not always gentle with her words. If it were so, the Lord would, perhaps, be satiated and tired, and end up awarding harsh punishments to the humans on earth. Alas, if He were to judge according to our merits, how many of us could escape heavy punishment? Have we not set up against neighbour, betrayed our country and our people, murdered with impunity, stained temples and ashrams with innocent blood, taken food away from the mouth of the hungry, swindled the fortunes of orphans and widows, destroyed Nature with impunity, desecrated water-courses with our foul greed and in general done everything to smash up this space-ship, this earth, this Vasundhara? But *Bhumir Bhumnah*, says the Bhu Sukta. Profound pity welling up from the patient, compassionate mother Goda Devi makes her challenge even the Lord. She had struggled and suffered to attain this Lord. For aeons she had aspired and as the 'emerald maid' (maragadha-p-pen) performed a unique vrata and gained union with Him.

But the Mother and the Acharyas care little for personal liberation when millions of human beings are struggling for a breath of grace.

*"What force condemned to birth and death and tears
Those conscious creatures crawling on the globe?
If earth can look up to the light of heaven
And hear an answer to her lonely cry,
Not vain their meeting, nor heaven's touch a snare".*

(Sri Aurobindo, Savitri)

As the Lord proceeds to administer some heavy punishment, Goda Devi knits her brows in anger, not caring whether she herself would be exiled by Him. For He is capable of renouncing

His consort. Goda Devi's act is the kind of extreme step that Ramanuja took in the Tirukkoshthiyur temple.

It was after a long period of anxious prayers that Nambi of Tirukkoshthiyur, a great Acharya, had agreed to teach Ramanuja the secret doctrine of Tirumantra, Dvaya and Charamasloka. But he made a compact: "You should vow upon my head that you will not reveal the secret to others. If you do, you will rot in hell". Ramanuja immediately took the vow as required and received upadesa.

The next thing he did was to go to the temple. A festival was on, and large waves of devotees had come there. His heart full of compassion, Ramanuja decided to show them the way to the Lord's presence. Accordingly, he went up the temple spire and shouted the upadesa for all to hear. Even as the recipients began to lave in the wonderful stream of devotion and wisdom, a call came from Nambi. Ramanuja obeyed the summons. When Nambi berated him and said Ramanuja would have to go to hell, the student replied humbly: "What is one man's suffering in hell when so many have been saved for heaven?" With tears pouring down, Nambi embraced Ramanuja:

*"Apart from saving themselves
By saving their souls
There is no one on this earth
Who, seeking to save others,
Dares to destroy himself.
Nay, not in all seven worlds, my son!"*

(Vadivazhakiya Nambi Dasar) .

Even the Supreme Lord cannot remain a stony judge in the face of such loving assault. There is charm in Goda Devi's anger that increases the pleasure of the Lord (bhoga rasa anukoolah). This can be noticed in her verses when she gives vent to her impatient despair. Why, she even dares to destroy herself to overcome the Lord's indifference. The Lord capitulates immediately and withdraws the uprisen hand ready to punish. He would rather not make use of his freedom to act. And so the knitted brow turns out

to be the saviour-cause that sends out arrows to splinter the idea of punishment.

In such defeat lies the Lord's victory. After all, the *lila* of creation was not started in vain. It may appear a chess-play based on blind chance and indifferent fate played by the Divya Dampati with the Mulaprakriti as the chessboard, sattwa, rajas and tamas as the colours of the squares, with Brahma, Siva and other gods as chessmen. But in reality, creation involves man, nature and god in an integral action and the end in view is universal ananda. Ranganatha concedes defeat with pleasure and proceeds with dispensing succour and joy to the aspirant souls and stroking them to a sense of fulfilment as Rama did to the squirrel which placed grains of sand to help Nila and Nala build the Sethu bridge.

Sri Goda Stuti - 26

*"Mother Goda Devi!
Lakshmi gleams like lightning
On the Dark Cloud in Srirangam
Which has created from its grace-shower
The nectar-stream that is you.
Desiring to cool the scorching heat of life
Good people come to this river
Which can nullify the poison of samsara".*

Goda Devi's anger is fleeting. Vedanta Desika finds that looking on her one can feel the streams of nectar flowing from her as a coolant to the heat of the hurly-burly of life. Once again he is lost in wonder at the Three-in-one figure which has a tantalising power about it.

In Srirangam reigns a Dark Cloud, full of grace-laden waters. It is almost difficult to look at this Cloud face-to-face, for there is a terribilita about it. The ancient Sangham classic *Paripadal* gives expression to Tirumal or Vishnu in terms of elemental nature imagery:

*"Your figure is that of the blue mountain,
Topped by rain-bearing clouds;
The sun's splendorous rays,*

*Aren't they your golden crown?
That brilliance shades thy garments.
Your garlands are gay like water-falls."*

Nammalvar shudders when comprehending the all-enveloping Supreme: What is this endless stretch of seeming nothingness (paazh)? Is this, then, the Mulaprakriti? He realises that this world is as real as the cosmic Beyond. If so, is the Lord the form and being of this Prakriti? Is he the original seed (mudhal tani vittu)?

Our minds are becalmed when we see the Dark Cloud Ranganatha adorned with a lightning streak. This golden gleam is Lakshmi, and the lightning is permanently stationed with the Lord. Like the kindly light that leads us out of the encircling gloom, Lakshmi's compassion saves us from suicidal despair that surrounds us because of the quirks of fate.

The lightning appears to ignite Ranganatha's grace. The moment he accepted Goda Devi's garlands of flowers and poetry (poomaalai and paamaalai), He had transformed her into a nectarean stream. She who had struggled in time had found love in Eternity. Till she was merged in Ranganatha, she had spoken for herself.

*"The Pure One with the white conch
Shows not Himself to me.
Entering my heart He tortures me
And daily leads me a dance!"*

But now she had been illumined by the divine union and was in a position to help others. An omnipotent warrior in the battle-grounds of bhakti yoga, Goda Devi had hewed well the path to immortality and paved the way with her immortal gem-like verses. Now the aspirants move easily on the pathway to God, waking up each other from the sleep of slavish ignorance into the dawn of spiritual wisdom.

*"The eastern sky is brightening
And the buffaloes are dispersing
For their early morning graze.*

*Stopping others from proceeding,
We have come to take you, and are waiting.
Wake up, jubilant girl, and sing the praises
Of the supreme God who tore
The horse-demon's mouth
And destroyed the wrestlers inimical.
Let us with our worship gratify Him".*

(Tr. R. Bangaruswami)

The *Tiruppavai* is the nectarean stream (sudha nadhi) which instils hope, strength and faith in the aspirants. Good people, prapannas, when they study and meditate upon *Tiruppavai* are cured of the fever and fret of life. In the *Tiruppavai* world, sattva holds court. The bath referred to by Goda Devi is the repetition of the nectarean names of the Lord. The vision she speaks of is Krishna the benevolent.

The goal posited by her on our behalf is kainkarya to the Lord. Her programme of action is simple, significant and swift. Those who approach *Tiruppavai* gain immediate (achirena) relief from the poison-fumes of samsara (dowrgatya durvishe) because it is the testament of Goda Devi who had received the showers of the Lord's grace (krupa suvrushti). It was Goda Devi's single-minded love for Ranganatha that had been drawn up by the divine and returned as the nectar of universal love. Like heavenly nectar, *Tiruppavai* too has been giving a new life to aspirants through the centuries and working silently for universal well-being.

Sri Goda Stuti - 27

*"Mother Goda Devi!
You are saving me
Though I have done wrong
This is appropriate.
Even though a babe bites her bosom,
By her breast-feeding".*

Vedanta Desika remains in meditative restfulness enjoying the streams of nectar that bathe him infusing joy and strength. He

is all wonderment. What is the name and nature of this patience and compassion of Goda Devi that saves the entire humankind from destruction? What tremendous reserves of pity and love are at the back of this universal kindness?

The evil that the human being is capable of appears like an indestructible mound of ugliness. Is man innocent of a single sin? Vedanta Desika breathes fire and brimstone upon man-made evils in the drama, *Sankalpa Suryodaya*. He spares none and is especially harsh with the Brahmins of his day who had begun to sell their souls for a mess of pottage. The pair Dambha (Pride) and Kuhanaa (hypocrisy) is the result of Desika's angry laughter.

"The sacraments (like upanayana) are solely of the nature of festivals. The performance of Sandhya is a matter of amusement, the repetition of Gayatri is interrupted by worldly talk; bodily purity is merely enacting a part.. Ha, ha, with heaps of long kusa grass round the fingers they seize their nose with the right hand and enact the performance of praanaayamam (breath control) with such ostentation that one would wonder whether they are alive or dead". (Tr. M.R. Rajagopala Iyengar)

Though we possess parents like Ranganatha and Goda Devi, we yet seek to remain children of darkness. Desecration of life and destroying our creators seem the black pastimes evolved by our mental machine. Are we aspirants for divinity or adventurers in destruction?

*"A yoke is laid upon the world's dim heart;
Masked are its beats from the supernal Bliss,
And the closed peripheries of brilliant Mind
Block the fine entries of celestial Fire,
Always the dark adventurers seem to win;
Nature they fill with evil's institutes,
Turn into defeats the victories of Truth,
Proclaim as falsehoods the eternal laws,
And load the dice of Doom with wizard lies".*

(Sri Aurobindo. Savitri)

Vedanta Desika exclaims in boundless astonishment that Goda Devi continues to be a guardian-angel (goptri) even though

man is such an inveterate criminal (*Jata aparadham api*). She who is purity incarnate, she who is the home of all the nobler qualities like love, patience, compassion and single-minded aspiration, Godadevi is yet able to forgive the absence of such qualities in man. Besides, apart from saving him from the punishment meted out by the Lord, she takes the trouble of sustaining him with nourishment, takes upon herself his sufferings and makes him worthy of his ancestry.

The poet recognises that such profound compassion proceeds only from one incomparable, priceless thing: the *matri-hridayam*, the Mother's heart. Man is a babe in the Mother's hands. He dirties the place around, spoils the food she has prepared, upsets her activities and confounds the well-ordered home. The Mother patiently cleans up the place, bathes the child, dresses him up in new clothes and then proceeds to re-arrange the house. He bites the bosom of the mother in his eagerness for more milk. But never does she punish him. Instead, she bears the pain with fortitude and feeds him carefully and seeks to make a man of him. When he is sick, it is she who takes the necessary medicines so that the cure may reach him effortlessly and sweetly through her breast-milk. Is there any limit to the spaces of this *matri-hridayam*? And the miracle of this divine ministry is not an obscure or rare occurrence. It is happening around us all the time. In the palace and in the hut, in the crowded urban flat and secluded rural cottage, *matri-hridayam* is the one miracle that has not ceased to be. It is appropriate for the *Bhu sukta* to call Mother as *Aditi*, the all-pervading, one who has the whole world as her body, the *Poorna*, for motherhood is present everywhere. *Goda Devi* symbolises such overflowing maternal love (*vatsalya nirbharata*) with which she sustains (*vardhayati*) us all.

The sustenance she gives is the most nourishing, easy to digest and sweetest food on earth. There is no equal to the mother's milk for the child. In the same way, for us there is no scripture to equal the sweet verses of *Tiruppavai*. The poem is our saviour, our guide. And *Goda Devi* our Mother in this chosen path of perfection.

"A mother to our wants, a friend in our difficulties, a persistent and tranquil counsellor and mentor, chasing away with her radiant smile, the clouds of gloom and fretfulness and depression, reminding always of the ever-present help, pointing to the eternal sunshine, she is firm, quiet and persevering in the deep and continuous urge that drives us towards the intergrality of the higher nature. All the work of the other powers lean on her for its completeness; for she assures the material foundation, elaborates the stuff of details and erects and rivets the armour of the structure".

(Sri Aurobindo. The Mother)

Sri Goda Stuti - 28

*"May Goda Devi, blue like sapphire,
Carrying the red lotus in her hand,
Bent by the weight of her bosom
As an overflowing ocean of love,
Who enthralled the Lord by her garland,
The daughter of Vishnuchitta,
Stay in our heart for ever".*

This verse is known as the 'dhyana sloka' on Godadevi. When we wish to meditate upon her innumerable auspicious qualities of this darling daughter of Vishnuchitta rise before us. It is almost as if we are quite lost in this ocean of beauty and love. Necessarily we have to limit the personality of the Mother upon whom we wish to contemplate so that we could hold on to the figure. Vedanta Desika chooses the simplest symbols that can evoke Godadevi in our mind's eye so that we can hold on to this figure in meditative silence. She would help us in keeping our tryst with the Divine.

Like Neela Devi, like Nappinnai, like Krishna himself, Godadevi is dark blue as a brilliant sapphire. We constantly live with this colour in the blue of the sky, in the spread of the sea and in the glow of the mountains. Goda Devi by herself appears as a blue-complexioned figure, though she is seen as "green like a blade of grass" (Sri Goda Stuti, verse 22) and 'maragada-p-pen' (the emerald maid) when in the company of Lakshmi. This is be-

cause blue takes on a green shine when close to yellow objects, and Lakshmi who is always with Narayana is golden, "yellow like gorochana".

The blue colour symbolises abundance of rains and hence a constant increase in prosperity in the form of cows. The cow is a Vedic image for Divine Light. An increase in cows betokens not only material prosperity but an increase in spiritual illumination. Meditating upon Goda Devi as a blue-complexioned figure will help illumine the inner spaces of our mind.

The red lotus in her hand calls upon the aspirants to be ever-wakeful as the lotus on the rise of the sun. *Tiruppavai's* gopikas wake up one of them: "In the tank at your backside garden red lotuses are abloom".

The lotus has a central place in the esoteric lore of Hindu mysticism. Vishnu in his twenty-four forms (Kesava, Janardhana, Padmanabha, Upendra etc.) is always represented with a lotus in one of His hands, the other three carrying the conch, the discus and the mace. A lotus rises from His navel, signifying creation. His limbs are described in terms of the lotus. As soon as we see a lotus, it is Vishnu and His consort that spring to our mind.

In terms of yoga, the lotus (chakra) symbolises the nerve-centres in one's body. The red lotus is associated with physical consciousness centre (muladhara) and is said to govern the physical down to the subconscious. Once progress is made, and the red lotus opens, the physical body remembers God. The spirit's ray enters matter. Also, the red lotus symbolises the consciousness growing red to the colour of Divine Love and indicates the Divine Presence on earth.

Goda Devi's compassion for the aspirant is further indicated by her slightly bent body due to the weight of her bosom. The milk of compassion continues to well up inspite of the wrong-doings of her children. She is the 'source of milk' (payasvati) and the 'source of ghee' (ghrtavati) as the Neela Sukta informs us. We are thus assured of the happiness that comes from health; physical and mental ailments dare not approach Goda Devi's

devotees. Her bent figure also indicates that she is leaning forward to hear our load of worries and save us from the evil of despair. She is also an ocean of love (saandhra vatsalya sindhuh), and her whole life was one single column of aspirant love:

"O vast ocean! As he churned you and took away the nectar, Ranganatha is torturing me and taking away my heart. Go to the Adishesha bed and speak of my sorrow to the hard-hearted Lord".

Indeed, the Lord had churned this ocean of intense love and brought out the immortal *Tiruppavai*. The hard-hearted Lord had, in a trice, capitulated to this aspiration and allowed Himself to be bound by her garlands. Vedanta Desika's description sculpts an image of great love and complete self-possession:

*"A deep of compassion, a hushed sanctuary,
Her inward help unbarred a gate in heaven;
Love in her was wider than the universe,
The whole world could take refuge in her single heart".*

(Sri Aurobindo. Savitri)

By concluding his description with the words 'Vishnuchitta's daughter' (Vishnuchitta aatmaja), Vedanta Desika brings Godadevi very close to us. She is our Perialvar's daughter! She is our Godadevi. There is no doubt that she is equal to Lakshmi, is incarnate Bhu and Neela, the dear consort of Ranganatha, a realised Acharya, a renowned authoress. What if?

She is the *daughter of our house*, our Goda Devi, our Andal, our Sudikkodutha Sudarkkodi, our Amukta Malyada. We have cleared the spaces of Kama's temple, decorated it and prayed with her to the Lord of Love; we have built sand castles (sitri) and requested Krishna not to disturb our play; we have played circle games (koodal) to find out the wishes of the Lord; we have watched Krishna at Brindavan; we have observed the 'pavai nonbu' (Dhanurmasa vrata) with her. She is no stranger to us for the *Nachiyar Tirumozhi* and *Tiruppavai* dominate our consciousness. The familiar friend, the darling daughter of our household, on

just a word from us in meditative silence, will unbar a gate in heaven for us. May she stay for ever in our minds (*nah hridi vilasatu*).

Sri Goda Stuti - 29

*"This auspicious prayer to Goda
Has blossomed in the devotion
Of the poet Venkatesa.
He who recites it
Will get eternal Kainkarya
At the lotus feet of Ranganatha
Who is ever with Lakshmi.
He also gains the Lord's grace."*

The *phala sruti*, the conventional closing verse, of *Sri Goda Stuti* has a history about it. It has often been debated why Vedanta Desika wrote twenty-nine verses for this stotra. Why didn't he write thirty to match the thirty of *Tiruppavai*? It is said that he wished to do so. But suddenly he felt that he must not dare to compete with Goda Devi and so stopped at the twenty-eighth and added a *phala sruti*. In any case, *Tiruppavai* also technically concludes at the twenty-ninth *pasuram* which begins, 'Sitram Siru Kale'.

Sri Goda Stuti has been praised universally as a fine combination of devotional love and poetic imagination. His prayer for poesy like the sounds of Goda Devi's anklets seems to have come true. In the words of P. Sri. Acharya:

"Sri Desika was as devoted to Goda Devi as she was devoted to Rangaraja. Goda Devi's heart melted and poured out as the *Sangat-t-Tamil maalai*, the best of poetry in Tamil inspired by the Sangham poets. Desika's heart melted and poured out as the best of poetry in Sanskrit inspired by the classic writers."

The poem, of course, defies translation for neither the emotional content nor the prosodic subtleties of the original Sanskrit poem can be conveyed in another language. Hanumanthapatti Madurakavi Srinivasa Iyengar has translated the poem into Tamil

verse with some success. The *stuti* has been commented upon by Sri Saila Tirumalai Nambi Raghavacharya and P.B. Annangaracharya in Sanskrit, and by K.M. Rajagopalacharya and V.N. Sriramadesikacharya in Tamil.

Vedanta Desika refers to his qualification for composing the poem as devotion in full bloom (*vikasita bhakteh*). This is no self-praise, for the poet contained worlds of devotion within himself. Apart from being an expert logician, scholarly exegeticist and renowned debater, Desika was a poet at heart who melted at the call of the Divine. His devotional hymns are justly famous. The Sri, Bhu and Goda stutis may said to form one group, as if Desika wished to have a modern parallel to the Vedic Sri, Bhu and Neela suktas. He has eminently succeeded for these hymns are recited with devotional fervour even today to gain divine grace. As Satyavrata Singh says:

"The Sri Vaishnava votaries of today perform the routine worship of the Tamil saints. But the Goda Stuti of our great Sri Vaishnava poet is the real worship, the real offering, the real Panchakalakritya and the real service of poetry to life".

The *Goda Stuti* has several lovely qualities (*bahuguna ramaneeya*). The subject is Goda Devi. Her madhura bhakti assures a major loveliness for the poem. By describing the wedding of Goda Devi and Ranganatha, the verses acquire an auspicious tone which brings *mangala* whenever and wherever they are recited. Flowers and honey mark the pleasant progression. Yet another attraction is the description of motherhood which infuses self-confidence and hope in us when we recite the poem. As long as we are assured of such a mother, what need we fear?

By constantly placing before us Ranganaja and Goda Devi, Vedanta Desika etches in our heart the Divya Dampati image. This is how we should approach the Divine. In his classic treatise, *Rahasyatrayasara*, Vedanta Desika has dealt with this idea in great detail. Our *prapatti* is to Ranganatha and Goda Devi, the Lord and our Mother:

"..... Since they form a single *seshi*, since they are ever of the same mind, since they are intimately attached to each other, and since they are inseparably connected with each other in their *svarupa* or essential nature, and in their *rupa* or forms, those who are established in sattva should understand the meaning of the word Narayana with its adjective Srimat in such a manner as will not be at variance with the inseparable unity of the tattvam (Bhagavan) with its attribute (Sri)....."

(Tr. M.R. Rajagopala Iyengar)

Therefore Vedanta Desika uses the phrase 'Srimatoh Rangabhartuh' in this verse. We cannot hope to exhaust the many lovely points regarding the *stuti* as it has stood the test of time who is the ultimate critic. Suffice it to say that recitation of *Tiruppavai* and *Sri Goda Stuti* will gain for us the empire of *kainkarya samrajya* at the lotus feet of Ranganatha (*sasvat charana kamala seva*) for all time to come, which really means we will have entered the life divine. We have the Acharyas and the ocean of Sri Vaishnava literature dipped in sattvic devotion as our ancestral property. Who is richer than us? To conclude with the vow of Vedanta Desika taken in *Rahasyatrayasara* which we could do well to emulate:

"Our youth has been spent in the enjoyment resulting from repetitions of the words of that prince of Sannyasins (Sri Ramanuja). Our days have been lived in happiness by casting off the hell of depending on any others (than the Lord); the arrogance of those who are perverse has also been annihilated for the satisfaction of good men; and for the rest of our life, we shall be earnestly and constantly looking up to the realisation of the vow of compassion taken by that divine couple for the fulfilment of whose purposes alone we exist".

(Tr. M.R. Rajagopala Iyengar)

